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HOIST WITH HER OWN PETARD

BY

REGINALD LUCAS

Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days
of the life of thy vanity for that is thy portion in
this life.—*Ecclesiastes ix, 9.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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HOIST WITH HER OWN PETARD.

CHAPTER I.

‘FACILIS DESCENSUS—’

JACK BALSTOUN was in some ways young of his age, although he had already entered upon such mature enterprises. He was quite ingenuous, for instance, respecting his advantages amongst marriageable young men. His tastes and habits hitherto had given him more ambition to shine as a county magnate than a London dandy. He regarded a tenants' ball as more important

than a Queen's ball, because he took genuine interest in the former, and found the latter only an occasion for passing an evening amidst rather greater luxury than usual. He would sooner hear that he had found favour with a local club than with all the matrons in Society: he felt more disposed to make friends with the chairman of the former worthies than with the most powerful of 'introducers' to whom young men on the verge of London life are apt to pay court. He possessed a reasonable amount of vanity: knew he was good-looking, and liked to feel that he was not bad company. But he was not disposed by nature to value himself as a marriageable item. Disciplined as he had been, then, by reverses, he was less liable than most people to count the cost of such a friendship as he was forming with Miss Palliser. He did not think

merely, he was absolutely convinced, that his heart was dead: he was incapable at present of contemplating an alliance. Indeed he was much occupied with thoughts of Mrs. Dasent. He had secretly visited her former lodging in the hope of picking up a crumb of information about her plans. Her prohibition on his writing he had observed. In the hour of disappointment he had elected to hold her in abstract as the pillar of his existence. She was to be an influence infinitely noble, pervading his daily life; something not to be spoken of or argued about; something which had been put out of reach, humanly speaking. He had worked himself up to a fine appreciation of this idea; he had never tried to break through the sentimental barrier by the common penny post: he had not the heart to begin now. It would have been a further surrender.

Mrs. Dasent was undeniably the chief occupant of his mind when Agatha spoke to him about Miss Palliser. Modified as his heroism may have been, he was still subject to the effect Mrs. Dasent had produced, and he was faithful to the conviction that no other woman could be of importance to him. 'It was in good faith, not bravado, that he had ridiculed his sister's fears. It had not occurred to him that the acquaintance might ripen into a love affair; he did not think so now. It had not occurred to him that Miss Palliser might take a serious interest in him: that began to strike him presently for the first time.

It rather amused him to think that anyone should waste their time in trying to ensnare such a knowing bird as himself: he was inclined to think too highly of Miss Palliser to believe even his sister's descrip-

tion of her ; but if it were true, he would be entertained by the promised chase. If he was of some consideration, as people appeared to think, he might as well get what amusement he could out of the fact. This was the spirit in which he proceeded to valse with Miss Palliser next time they met. She looked marvellously well to-night ; she danced superbly ; she was so bright and clever that Jack found the occupation agreeable. They went downstairs after the dance for some supper. On the staircase a man met them and begged Miss Palliser to dance with him. She declared she was going away, and passed on with a want of ceremony not far removed from rudeness.

‘That man looks disappointed,’ said Jack : ‘you are not going, are you?’

‘I don’t think so, but I can’t be bothered with him.’

Jack looked respectably surprised at such a straightforward lie.

‘Another instance of saying what you mean?’ he enquired.

‘What does it matter. I can’t bear that man: he is a little toad. Let us go and sit over there: I hate people crowding past me.’

They went to a distant table and sat down to a repast fit for a Roman Emperor. Miss Palliser allowed her glass to be filled with champagne, and said she would have an ortolan. There were none: they had all been eaten.

‘It is always like that at the end of the evening. Men are greedy pigs: as soon as women begin to go, they come here and gorge themselves. Look at those four at that table: they have probably eaten six apiece.’

‘They are stupid little birds, I think,’

said Jack. 'They hardly seem real: I would much sooner eat a bit of pheasant or partridge.'

'One doesn't expect solid facts at a ball,' said Miss Palliser. 'You don't want to talk shop or eat mutton chops. And you hardly expect to see pheasants in June, do you?'

Jack with a laugh admitted himself caught.

'Strawberries are seasonable, anyhow,' he said. 'Will you have some?'

There was something in her manner that attracted him: it was not free from slang, but charm is not to be weighed and measured like other female attributes. Jack recognised the fact with satisfaction. He realised that he was going to find her companionship amusing, and he prepared to submit with what he imagined was good-humoured cynicism.

He made an engagement a few days later to play polo at the Riverside Club, of which he had become a member. His old friend, Tommy Browne, had got up a game: Jack was to play, and he had been in great spirits at the prospect. He went to his club to lunch early, and had already sat down at a table when a waiter brought him a note. It was addressed in an unknown hand, and not one of great elegance. It contained an invitation to drive to the Crystal Palace on Major Cruttle's coach, and dine there: it was signed 'Edith Palliser.'

Jack was, to his own astonishment, thrown into great confusion. To begin with, it was rather a shock to find that she wrote so uncouthly. What concerned him more was this: an hour ago he had been desperately keen on his polo; a week ago he had not cared much about polo,

and had certainly been indifferent to all other interests. To-day, after having been enthusiastic over his promised game, he now found a woman's message was fluttering his serenity. He tried to adhere to his original intention; then tried to persuade himself that he was fonder of a drive on a coach than a game of polo; finally lost all sense of shame, threw over the polo, and abandoned himself to the mysterious new pleasure.

They were to start from Colonel Paliser's house in Brook Street. Jack arrived there punctually you may be sure; still in a state of cynicism—tempered with trepidation. The party consisted of a married lady whose husband was unknown in the society which she adorned; a married couple, approaching the same relation to one another; and another man, named Forbes.

‘Isn’t Colonel Palliser coming?’ asked Jack, as they prepared to start.

‘Dear no!’ said Miss Palliser, ‘he’d be a dreadful nuisance. Lady Tilney is chaperoning me.’

The lady deputed to this gentle office sat beside Major Cruttle, and Jack was allowed to sit by his friend. He felt strangely elated. He was not fond of driving at any time; the road into Battersea is not of bewitching beauty; he was amongst strangers; yet he was amazingly happy. Truth to tell, Miss Palliser was at her best this afternoon. They got upon the subject of books, and it was evident that she had read extensively, and had understood what she was reading about. Jack, in all the pride of considerable knowledge, paraded his pet notions, and led the way in a respectable discussion. It was delightful to find a mine of good taste

under this smiling surface; it was, he admitted, a pleasant surprise.

Everything went swimmingly till dinner-time. It was pleasant dawdling on the terrace overlooking the wide expanse of suburban civilisation, though it might not be a very interesting study. The sky was blue and the air was cool, and they were sociably and quietly disposed.

But early in the course of dinner things took a turn. The subject of suburban residences cropped up, and the opinion was general that it was not a cheerful phase of existence. Major Cruttle said he didn't see why: the fellows one met in the trains seemed jolly enough. They were keen gardeners, as a rule; domestic life appeared to satisfy them; their general air suggested a happy life, if a narrow one. He did not believe they needed much pity. The ladies thought such existence unen-

durable. Jack had no liking for it, but imagined it suited some people very well. The two other gentlemen, Mr. Forbes and Mr. Gilmer, accepted the general opinion. Mr. Forbes had once been a soldier ; he was now an idle man, who had no apparent object beyond amusing himself and making love to Miss Palliser. Mr. Gilmer was the married man of the party. He was a Scotchman ; simple, honest, dull. His wife had married him for his money, and resented the inclusion of his attentions in the bargain. He was sandy-faced ; took everything in earnest ; was desperately in love, and proportionately miserable.

‘ I think it would be terrible,’ he said, ‘ to be always so near a great city.’

‘ You’d like to live amongst your eternal peat bogs,’ said his wife, rudely.

‘ I think Aberdeenshire is well enough,’ he replied, in an aggrieved tone.

‘ Well enough for some people, perhaps ; it wouldn’t satisfy me all the year round,’ said his graceless lady.

‘ I was very happy there many years,’ said the Scotchman, with a quiet simplicity that immediately won Jack’s heart.

He wanted to take his part and snub Mrs. Gilmer; he hoped Edith Palliser would do so.

But Mr. Forbes chose to be facetious.

‘ I suppose you spent all the mornings on the railway-platform shouting out “ Abairdeen Heerald,” and went curling all the afternoon.’

‘ Curling is a fine game,’ asserted Gilmer.

‘ With plenty of whuskey and a braw haggis,’ answered Forbes. ‘ Miss Palliser, can’t we have a haggis for dessert?’

Jack saw that Gilmer was hurt by this raillery, and wished Miss Palliser would stop it at once. To his horror she encouraged it. She laughed loudly.

‘You are a Scotchman yourself, Mr. Forbes,’ she said. ‘It’s like one nigger calling another nigger “darkie.”’

Mrs. Gilmer took a turn.

‘You should see Willie’s friends at home : they are a grubby lot : whiskey and curling is all they live for.’

‘And the Kirk, I suppose,’ said Forbes. ‘The Kirk people where I live are wonderful creatures ; like undertakers out of Noah’s ark. Aren’t yours the same?’

‘Willie is great on Kirk matters, aren’t you, Willie?’

‘So am I,’ said Forbes at once. ‘I can cut them all down at a paraphrase.’

‘I am not aware that there is anything to laugh at in the Kirk,’ said Gilmer, flushing.

‘My dear fellow, we Scotchmen never see the laugh in anything as a rule,’ retorted Forbes.

The fact that he was a Scotchman redeemed this speech from rank insolence, but it was still brutal. Gilmer was defending his home, not merely against public ridicule, but against his wife. One could have seen the situation at once, even if it had not been already familiar. The daily struggle to win some of her sympathy for his home instincts must have rendered his life sad enough. To see these very instincts held up to derision before her, must have reduced him to despair. Jack felt for him acutely: Major Cruttle ate his dinner in silence; but the others continued their ill-timed wit. Miss Palliser enjoyed it thoroughly; she had no scruple in making Gilmer a common butt.

‘Mr. Gilmer, do you wear a kilt at home?’ she asked; ‘with lots of knives and snuff-boxes all over you. I wish you had put it on to-night.’

Forbes took the menu and rapidly drew an ingenious caricature, at which they laughed afresh.

‘What Willie likes best are the games,’ said Mrs. Gilmer. ‘He’s in all his glory then. There is more jabbering and drinking at those gatherings than I should have supposed human beings could have got through.’

‘I’m not ashamed of my clan,’ exclaimed Gilmer, stoutly.

‘I am very often,’ said his wife, scornfully. ‘Edith, you must come this year and see what dreadful people they are. It won’t be so bad if I have some one to laugh with.’

‘I will come, certainly,’ she said. ‘Mr. Gilmer, may I dance with you in your kilt, with bagpipes playing?’

So they went on amusing themselves, wounding poor Gilmer, and disgusting

Jack Balstoun. He made more than one vain attempt to turn the current, but failed. Then he contented himself with sitting silent until they left the table. After dinner there was time for a little walk in the gardens before driving home. Miss Palliser at once lit a cigarette and carried off Jack Balstoun to a quiet part.

‘Do you know, I am very much distressed,’ he began at once.

‘What about?’ she asked.

‘About the way you all behaved to that man at dinner,’ said Jack.

‘Mr. Gilmer,’ exclaimed Miss Palliser. ‘One always makes fun of him: he’s so absurd.’

‘But you could see he didn’t like it,’ protested Jack. ‘Before his wife too: it wasn’t fair.’

‘She always does it,’ answered Miss Palliser, ‘as much as anybody.’

‘The more shame for her,’ said Jack, hotly. ‘And the more shame for Forbes to encourage her.’

‘What does it matter?’ said Edith Palliser, carelessly.

‘Nothing to him : a great deal to Gilmer. I did feel sorry for him : he kept on looking despairingly at his wife. His evening won’t have brought him much enjoyment.’

Miss Palliser laughed in an irritating way.

‘How sentimental you are ! It’s very amusing.’

‘I am not sentimental, but I hate bullying. They bullied him, and I didn’t like to see you joining them.’

He felt excited by the words : he knew he was getting into deep water.

‘Why not ?’ she asked, demurely.

‘Because I thought it wasn’t nice, and

therefore I didn't like to see you doing it.'

'I am so sorry,' she said, frankly. 'I won't do it any more.'

'Thank you,' said Jack. 'I knew you would be sorry when I showed you your mistake.'

He said this in a patronising way: perhaps it was a throw back to the philosopher *rôle*. But it annoyed Miss Palliser: he had not taken her concession in the spirit she looked for.

Again she gave that irritating laugh.

'You amuse me,' she said. 'You are so grandmotherly.'

He had a horrible suspicion that she had been laughing at him.

'I don't think I said anything unreasonable,' he said.

'I don't know that you need have said anything at all,' she replied; and, seeing Mr. Forbes in front of her, she called him.

They were very soon talking and laughing more noisily than is seemly in a place of public resort.

Jack went home in a bad humour. He and Gilmer sat silent on the coach whilst the others talked. Jack gave him cigarettes : he could think of no other comfort to offer. With all his stern resolutions, he was drifting into the waters of which the shoals and quicksands are so perilous. He was slipping from his vaunted rock. Mrs. Dasent was enshrined there still, but he was a little further from her. He set himself now to ponder reverently on her perfections ; but try as he might, his thoughts continually drifted back to Edith Palliser, and hung thick around her. This was the humour in which he left the coach in Brook Street, and retired to his rooms.

It was not much use disguising the fact.

He had fallen in love straight off. It was a common affair: he was fascinated by a woman he might have been expected to dislike; certainly not one he could consider perfect. She had faults which almost deprived her at times of the title of lady; the world was not without excuse for condemning her as bad form. She was entirely reckless, headstrong, and undisciplined. Yet she did not lack good qualities. Jack had already found out that she possessed considerable culture. A few days later he went with her to a theatre. The play ended in a scene of great pathos. Jack was afraid she would turn it into ridicule: when he looked at her there were tears on her cheek. She said nothing as he helped her to put on her cloak, and they went out in silence. Whilst the servant was fetching the carriage they sat apart, and she spoke.

‘What a beautiful play. I would give almost anything to have that woman’s part.’

‘Are you fond of acting?’ he enquired, a good deal surprised.

‘Oh, yes : but one never gets a chance like that. I feel as if I could drive my audience wild if I had that part. I would put such life into it, that they should know what it is to feel, to feel all down their backs.’

There was no touch of conceit in what she said, only enthusiasm and conviction. Jack looked at her with delight. She was looking especially handsome this evening. The soft feathery border of her cloak made an effective setting for her graceful head ; and her pale face was lit up by unusual excitement. Her appreciation of what she had seen was evidence of a deep poetic trait. This was a new charm, and Jack began to wonder in what character she would

appear next. She presented as many phases as sunlight dancing on water, a swift and dazzling variety. He had no wish to analyse: he was content to marvel and pursue.

Lady Jane Diggle had made an effort at first to repress this tendency. She had scolded and entreated by turns, but without avail. Agatha had pleaded now and then, but she had got only laughing assurances that it was all right.

‘She’s much too independent to think of laying traps,’ Jack had declared. ‘She has strong likes and dislikes, and she acts upon them. We are very good friends; but she takes no pains to keep me to herself. The other day she was positively rude to me at the Crystal Palace because I annoyed her, and she found John Forbes more amusing.’

He flattered himself he could gauge

human nature pretty well. It must have been instinct had he possessed the power : he had had few opportunities of studying it outside books.

After a time both ladies withdrew their supervision, being otherwise occupied. One morning Agatha had come into her aunt's room looking pale and depressed. The course of gaieties seemed to have worn her out ; there was an air of general breakdown. Aunt Jane looked at her uneasily.

‘ My dear, you have been doing too much ; we must go away for a few days. I will let Christopher go home and get the house ready, and we can follow to-morrow. There is nothing this week worth staying for.’

Agatha waited till this decision had been given ; then she answered, in a low voice,

‘ I am not ill, Aunt Jane, but I think I

should like to go home. I don't want to be in London any more.'

Aunt Jane scented mischief.

'What's the matter now, child?'

'I don't want to give you trouble, Aunt Jane. Please don't worry about me: only let me go.'

She spoke dismally, like a person begging a doctor to ease her pain.

'Something must have happened, Agatha. What is it?'

'Lord Morecombe has proposed to me, and I have refused him. I meant to write and tell you after I got to Balstoun: you have a right to know.'

'Refused Morecombe!'

Lady Jane's glasses seemed to flash with the indignation gleaming behind them.

'Yes,' said Agatha, meekly.

'In the name of wonder, why?' demanded Aunt Jane.

‘Because I don’t care for him—like that.’

‘When did you come to that conclusion?’ asked the aunt, stiffly.

‘I never imagined for a moment that I did love him. I like him immensely: I have always thought him clever and agreeable, and I looked upon him as a friend.’

‘My dear Agatha,’ broke from the indignant lady.

‘Oh, Aunt Jane, don’t be cross. You are not angry, are you?’ pleaded Agatha.

‘I am very much surprised. You make a great fuss of the man, and throw him over when it comes to the point.’

Agatha made a gesture.

‘Aunt Jane, don’t say that. You are accusing me of behaving badly to him. It is quite enough to think I have made him unhappy: don’t make me feel it has been my fault entirely.’

Aunt Jane was seriously put out. She had regarded this match as a settled thing, and had plumed herself on her good fortune. It was pardonable pride, not vulgar delight of rank, but satisfaction at seeing her charge placed in such good hands. Morecombe was an exceptional man: there was nothing against him except his appearance, and Agatha seemed not to mind that. She had shown so great a predilection for him—and she had refused him.

‘You are not the sort of girl to rave about the first good-looking boy you talk to: what made you do it?’

‘I have told you, Aunt Jane: because I don’t love him.’

Aunt Jane sat in gloomy silence.

‘I don’t see why you should run away home all the same. You’ve refused the best offer you are ever likely to get; it’s no reason you shouldn’t stay and amuse

yourself. There are plenty of other people besides him in the world.'

Agatha suddenly dropped on her knees and buried her face in her aunt's lap. She sank down beside her, and sobbed violently.

'Aunt Jane, Aunt Jane, don't be so unkind. You don't think what you are saying. Mother would never have been angry with me for what I have done. I am so miserable, and there is no one I can look to for help except you. You mustn't scold me.'

The gold-rimmed glasses fell from the lady's nose; then she spread her arms round the slim figure crouching at her feet, and let fall two large tears upon the golden hair.

'My darling, never mind what I said,' she whispered. 'I am always hurting people's feelings when I least intend it.'

I can't be all that Cornelia would have been to you, but I want to take her place as well as I can. Forget my wretched temper; don't cry;' and she smoothed the fair forehead with a tenderness which one would hardly have expected from such an overwhelming lady.

She was anxious now to take Agatha away with her, but Agatha had a craving for Balstoun: it was her own home she sought as sanctuary. Lady Jane disliked the idea: she thought the girl would mope there, but hardly liked to thwart her. Possibly Lady Jane might pay a visit presently. This was suggested; but Agatha, although ready enough to welcome her aunt, foresaw difficulty in composing such a trio as would then be her companions at Balstoun, and she hesitated to press the idea into definite shape.

Aunt Jane tried to ascertain whether

she was right in surmising that Agatha was troubled by some other attachment. She had no suspicion of any person in particular. Many men had admired her niece ; she could even suppose that some had proposed to her, but Agatha had never seemed the least disturbed by any of them ; had certainly never talked of running away by reason of grief they had caused her, or she them. She had plenty of allies like Freddy White—none of them so intimate as he, but then he was a sort of relation. Aunt Jane did not think there were germs of a love-affair in any of these friendships. On the other hand, Agatha was suffering from such obvious distress that Aunt Jane felt there ought to be something under the surface. She dropped a few judicious insinuations, but Agatha was uncommunicative as a sphinx. If she had any secret, it was evidently too

sacred to be revealed even to Aunt Jane ; something to be guarded with absolute jealousy, until she had the delicious avowal that the message from her heart found an echo in that to which it went.

CHAPTER II.

JACK PROPOSES.

It was really due in a great measure to chance that Jack Balstoun became engaged to Edith Palliser. It is difficult to aver that luck plays no part in human affairs, when things happen as they did in this instance. Let facts make out a case for themselves.

Jack Balstoun was sitting in his rooms one morning thinking of Miss Palliser, and wondering when and where he could be sure of meeting her. By an unusual

oversight he had neglected to inform himself of her plans, and he found his prospect a blank. He was not sure whether she was not engaged for a water-party; could not recollect whether or no she had talked of the opera; and had no means of telling at which house he should find her at night. This was the condition in which he found himself. On one side of his mind lurked considerable dissatisfaction at his own weakness; he was a failure self-condemned; but he didn't care; he was going with the stream now, and he rushed along with no more idea of resistance than the million or more of other young men in like predicament around him.

She was very likely riding in the Park, though she had not been regular there lately: he would ride and look for her. He rang the bell to order his horse, but

when the servant came he brought a note which altered the situation. It was a message from Agatha, that she was going home at once. She was tired out, she said, and wanted to get away before she was ill : would Jack go round and see her? He said nothing about riding, and went to Grosvenor Square forthwith. He found Agatha alone ; looking sufficiently unwell to make her story credible, but rather brighter for her good understanding with her aunt and the prospect of seeing Balcoun. Jack was affectionately devoted to his sister, and forgot his own affairs in his concern for her.

‘ Dear little Agatha, what is it? Too much dissipation?’

He wondered what Morecombe would say to her departure. Of course he wondered too how matters stood between them, and did not know whether to be glad or

sorry to think that nothing was to come of it. He could not wish his sister to remain unmarried in order to be at Balstoun whenever he happened to be there and wanted a companion. He saw the advantage of such a marriage as this, provided she liked the man ; but for himself he had never been able to get up any enthusiasm over Morecombe. He was not sure whether it was his voice or his boots, or what it was ; there was something about the man that annoyed him every time they met. Anyhow, for the present he seemed out of court, and Jack wanted to know exactly what was the matter with his sister, and why she was going away.

‘ I feel like a candle in a hot room—in a state of collapse. I feel as if I had no bones, and all my blood had turned to water. I always want to sit down instead of standing up.’

‘I know,’ said Jack, ‘anæmia; that’s it. You go home and drink up all the Burgundy in the house; pour it down. And sit in the sun all day.’

‘That’s what I mean to do; sit in the sun of course, not pour down Burgundy. But Jacky dear, can’t you come too? It would be so nice. The season is nearly over, I don’t suppose you, of all people, mind missing the last of it.’

Jack was taken unawares.

‘I don’t know that I can come at once,’ he said, ‘but I will be there presently.’

‘I want you to come now; to-day, with me.’

He was silent, and she pressed him.

‘Why can’t you?’

‘Lots of things. I’m dining out every night.’

‘Say you are ill; it won’t matter as long as you give plenty of notice.’

‘I’ve promised to do a lot of things. I can’t.’

She went to him and took his arm.

‘Jacky, you know why I want you to come. I don’t like leaving you with Miss Palliser.’

‘Agatha, how stupid you are. Why won’t you believe it is all right?’ he asked, petulantly.

‘Because you don’t believe it yourself. You know you are running your head straight into the noose,’ she said.

Jack was undecided whether to continue his stout denial or begin a policy of bounce.

‘If only you knew the lady better, you wouldn’t abuse her,’ he said, by way of compromise.

‘One doesn’t want to know her intimately to see she is not nice. Her people are not nice, her friends are not nice, and she is not nice.’

‘That’s sweeping,’ said Jack. ‘I am one of her friends; how about me?’

‘You are out of place there: that’s all.’

‘Go home and don’t trouble your head about her or me,’ he said, caressingly.

But Agatha was not to be thwarted.

‘Can’t I say anything to dissuade you,’ she said. ‘I wish I could, though I don’t suppose I can make you see with my eyes. Jack, I know you would never be happy if you married her: you can’t believe it now, but you would soon change your mind. You know I would do anything to ensure your happiness: I shouldn’t interfere like this without good cause. If it had been possible I would gladly have helped you to marry Mrs. Dasent. Father’s objections were very well, but I knew how good she was, and I believe you would have been happy with her. For that very reason I

hate this new idea. It seems dreadful that, after caring so much for Mrs. Dasent, you can be capable of falling in love with Miss Palliser.'

She paused, and Jack looked abnormally grave. The appeal to his constancy was rousing his dormant loyalty ; he felt a throb of anguish as the past floated vividly through his recollection ; so vividly that it almost alarmed him. He had a premonitory twinge of remorse.

' I am doing a desperate thing,' Agatha went on, ' because, if it ends in your marrying Miss Palliser, I shall never be able to unsay this, and we can never forget it ; but I care for your future so much that there is no risk I would not run.'

Nobody likes being lectured about his love-affairs ; nobody likes being told he is making a fool of himself. Even from Agatha this advice was disagreeable.

‘You don’t understand,’ said Jack.

This sounded sensible enough, though it would be hard to say what it meant.

‘That’s true,’ she answered. ‘I can’t understand how you can like Miss Palliser, after caring for such a woman as Mrs. Dasent.’

‘You said that before,’ was Jack’s curt rejoinder.

Agatha appealed to him.

‘Don’t be angry, dear. I don’t interfere from a love of meddling. Don’t let us quarrel, Jack.’

‘You mustn’t bully me, then,’ he said. He had all the inclination to quarrel, but there was something about Agatha to-day—so gentle, so pleading—that it disarmed him. ‘Never mind,’ he said, relenting, ‘I’m not going to be angry. You mustn’t be hard on Edith Palliser: there are many people more deserving of hard names than

she—perhaps you'll admit that some day. As for Mrs. Dasent——' there was another pause. 'Well,' Jack said then, 'a man mustn't despair because one ray of sunshine has faded.'

Agatha shook her head: this she knew was fine fencing. She was grievously troubled at her brother's surrender, and would go to any length in the hope of redeeming him. But her time was running out; the train had to be caught; and they were interrupted. Before she had finished her expostulation, the brougham was at the door. Lady Jane took her niece to the station, and, considering the maid and the dressing-bag, there would be no room for anyone else. Jack said good-bye on the door-step, and, having watched the brougham out of sight, retraced his steps gloomily to St. James's.

A lover is probably above all things a

creature of impulse. He lives in a world of gossamer, where a breath or a blow effects a transformation. Agatha's word in season had not missed its mark. She had spoken of Mrs. Dasent without calculation; she could not have displayed more delicate tact. Jack was arrested. This parting with his sister was distressing: he was one of those persons who find it grievous to say good-bye at the close of a happy companionship. The scattering of friends afflicted him, and peopled the air with ghosts over whom he could have wept. It was a love of association, in which Agatha's departure caused an irreparable rift.

In this frame of mind he returned to his rooms. A strong reaction was setting towards Mrs. Dasent; her influence engrossed him again; he could not imagine how he had begun to waver. He spent an hour or two thinking over the past;

refreshing his drooping faith. It all came back to him with undiminished fervour: she had been his only true love. Agatha was right—no other attraction could be worthy of him if he claimed to be a man of character.

He wished he had gone home with Agatha: he would follow quickly. He must dine out several times, but he would not stay in London longer than was necessary. As for to-day, he would go and walk in the country. He recollected his uncle's praise of Ham Common, and decided to go there. Arthur was unluckily out, so he must do without a companion. Anyhow, he could get a stretch in the open air and clear his brain of perplexities. Miss Palliser was banished to obscurity: he had resumed the *rôle* of the philosopher of the dead heart. Mrs. Dasent was before him in a thousand familiar aspects.

He marvelled that they should have receded even a little : they should not do so again. His allegiance was sworn anew to the shrine in the cottage on Windlaw ; this other affair was a foolish flirtation.

Jack went by train to Twickenham, and crossed the river in the ferry of ballad renown. On the opposite shore he passed across a shady meadow to look at a house which Arthur had pointed out from the distance. It was a mansion built of red bricks, ancient, and of fair design. Jack leaned against the iron gates and cogitated on past days—say three hundred years ago—when this was as much a country seat as was his own Balstoun now. Yonder, not far away, lay Hampton Court ; this house was a worthy neighbour ; romantic, and a fit home of many legends. He had a wish to invade its privacy and learn its history.

The public were welcome to Hampton Court, with its notice-boards, and keepers, and guide-books; he was captivated by this sister mansion, and would fain have made her better acquaintance. He walked round the boundary wall and inspected it again from the other side, then turned off, in a meditative mood, down an avenue, to the common beyond. He had not decided whether to walk back to Richmond through the park, or to cross the river again and go to Hampton. Without exact purpose he strolled across the common, conscious only of the presence of a few nursemaids with their charges, a postman on a tricycle, and a flock of geese. A road divided the common, and at its side stood a bench, beneath a sturdy plane-tree: he went there to sit and think.

He rested himself a little, and came to the conclusion he would go to Hampton

Court ; he was in the humour for moralising, and there was food for it there. Presently he rose and looked up and down the road : a butcher's cart was passing, but there was little sign of life. He looked back at Richmond Park, and admired the depth of its summer foliage. He looked round the common again : it was a pleasant green lawn. Then he discovered that on the other side of the plane-tree sat a lady painting ; he required no second look to assure himself that it was Edith Palliser.

An hour ago he had decided that he did not really care about her ; that he had been an ass to drift into flirtation, because it was almost a slur on the great and noble passion of his life. And now, sad to confess, his heart was leaping and bumping underneath his ribs. For a moment he felt inclined to run away ; he hesitated, and was lost.

‘What does it matter,’ he thought, ‘I am not going to be a fool any longer. I can’t drop her at once. Anyhow, I must see her again; I can’t leave London very well without calling. Why should I be frightened now.’

He went boldly up and bowed to the lady: she turned her head quickly, equally astonished and glad, it seemed, at his appearance.

‘Mr. Balstoun!’ she exclaimed. ‘What an odd place to meet you in.’

‘You didn’t meet me—I followed you here,’ said Jack, at random.

Miss Palliser put a brush into her mouth, and looked at her picture.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked.

‘Anywhere. I came for a walk. Do you often come here?’

‘Sometimes. I drive down and leave my pony at that inn,’ she said.

‘What an accomplished person you are!’ said Jack, looking at her canvas. ‘I never knew you could paint.’

She made no affectation of modesty.

‘Do you like it?’ she asked. ‘It requires a little idealising. That church is ugly, so I have painted in one I saw at Teddington the other day: that improves it. That long, straight road is not beautiful, so I have taken the liberty of diverting it. Otherwise it’s a good sort of common, and as the grocers’ carts all pass behind me, I rather like the view.’

As she spoke she rapidly sketched in the figures of three boys playing cricket, and Jack watched her without speaking.

‘How far are you going to walk?’ she asked.

‘A long way,’ said Jack. ‘I want exercise. I only had a station bun for lunch.’

‘I brought a hamper,’ said Miss Palliser.

‘You can improve your lunch out of that if you like. I am going to make some tea before I go back; but it’s too early yet.’

‘I feel tempted to give up my walk and stay here for tea,’ said Jack.

She did not press him.

‘You can go for your walk and come back this way, if you like,’ she said.

Jack meant to leave her, but he objected to her indifference.

‘I must do a serious tramp,’ he said. ‘No tea: though it will very likely end in my buying fruit of every greengrocer on the way.’

‘I can’t understand why men think so much of exercise. I never bother about it, and I get on very well,’ said Miss Palliser.

‘It keeps one from getting fat,’ said Jack.

‘Nonsense : I am not fat,’ answered Miss Palliser. ‘People are fat and thin just as they are good-looking or ugly : it’s all a matter of luck.’

‘Still I hate sluggards,’ said Jack.

‘Walking machines are quite as bad,’ she replied. ‘Do you remember what Monkbarns says? “A walk in the garden once a day is enough for any thinking being : no one but a fool or a foxhunter wants more.”’

‘Monkbarns knew he wasn’t likely to get fat,’ said Jack.

‘I don’t suppose he considered appearances,’ she answered.

‘Then he was a fool if he wasn’t a foxhunter. I don’t think anyone has a better right to neglect his appearance than his mind. We are given bodies as well as souls, and we ought to take as much care of one as the other.’

‘It’s the last duty we are likely to neglect,’ she said, laughing.

Jack studied her. The light summer gown and wide straw hat were immensely becoming. She was interested in her work, and free from any taint of London *ennui*: truly an attractive lady. Jack forgave himself for having been interested in her. It was ended now, but there had been excuse for him. He roused himself from his reverie and got up: he had been sitting on the grass beside her stool.

‘I must go,’ he said.

Miss Palliser did not look up from her work.

‘Must you? Good-bye,’ she answered.

Jack stood a little while tapping his boot with his stick.

‘My sister left London to-day,’ he said.

‘Where has she gone?’

‘Home. She was tired of London.’

‘Isn’t she coming back?’

‘No. I think I shall go too.’

‘Really? That’s a sudden idea, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. I am tired of being in London. It is a stupid place.’

‘I don’t think it is. I find life much duller and stupider at home.’

‘But you have plenty of occupations,’ Jack protested. ‘You can paint and ride and read.’

‘So I can here : and see people and go to the theatre into the bargain. I hate cant : it’s absurd talking like that of London. You know you like it very well.’

Jack was angry. He had assumed a lofty air, and he had been deservedly snubbed.

‘After that I had better go,’ he said.

Miss Palliser said good-bye for the second time.

‘ You will come and see us before you start?’ she added.

‘ Oh, yes,’ said Jack. ‘ When are you likely to be in?’

‘ Usual time,’ she replied, without looking up. ‘ You know when I am to be found.’

‘ Thank you. I shall try and come.’

Jack ought to have gone now : he had said good-bye twice : but he lingered on.

He had made a resolve to be quit of Miss Palliser : it was not to be hinted that he found difficulty in acting upon it. At the same time it was undeniably provoking to be treated like this ; Miss Palliser apparently did not care two straws whether he stayed or went. Not only that ; she asked him to call before leaving London as if he were, say, a second cousin who deserved a little cheap civility. He had made up his mind to sever the alliance, but the cooling

off was to be on his side: she had no business to be indifferent as well.

‘How long will it take you to finish that?’ he asked, nodding towards her sketch.

‘I don’t know. I shall go on till I like the look of it,’ she answered.

‘What an odd person you are,’ said Jack.

‘Why?’ she demanded.

‘You are such a mixture of discipline and—the other thing. You set about this painting with all the gravity of an art-student. A few hours hence you will be doing something quite frivolous.’

Miss Palliser laughed as if this really amused her.

‘Your solemnity, Mr. Balstoun, is wonderful. I find life easy enough. I prefer making my own rules: that’s why. I paint or I amuse myself as the humour

takes me: it really isn't worth while considering what other people are doing.'

'But if you live in a certain society you must observe its rules.'

'They are arbitrary: it is well someone should take an independent line. Who wrote that thing about the young man in a fix between social law and natural inclination? How does it end?

"Then Reason seemed her aid to lend,
And this distinction drew;
Make yourself Nature's slave, my friend,
And Pleasure slave to you."

That is my principle.'

'You are delightfully original,' said Jack.

'You are dreadfully conventional.'

It was a stinging retort. No philosopher, least of all a young one, likes to be called conventional. He would far sooner be a convicted felon.

‘I can’t see why people shouldn’t get satisfaction out of life, if they choose,’ she went on.

‘Does anyone?’ asked Jack, sententiously.

‘Not many people,’ she answered. ‘A great mind is more easily satisfied than a small one. The majority of people have not great minds: therefore they are seldom satisfied.’

‘That is putting self-satisfied people at a premium,’ said Jack.

‘Quite right too: I hate discontented people.’

‘Also asserting that you have a great mind,’ said Jack, slyly. ‘Which of course I admit.’

Miss Palliser smiled.

‘I think it is just large enough to be above the trivial things which make up life to a great extent.’

‘That sounds grand enough for ambition,’ said Jack.

‘Oh, I haven’t a scrap of that,’ she said. ‘I admire it when it is genuine: really ambitious people are hardly ever dissatisfied. It is the men who have a good deal, and are accustomed to have plums fall into their mouths, who are never satisfied with life.’

‘I suppose that means me?’ said Jack, with the self-consciousness of twenty-two.

‘Not at all,’ said Miss Palliser, ‘I always looked on you as different from other people. Your exploit on that island was original. It gave you character: that was why I wanted to know you when you came to London.’

‘And do you find me spoilt by contagion?’

Miss Palliser painted a moment in silence, whilst Jack watched her eagerly.

‘What do you think of my picture?’ she said at last.

He pulled himself up, surprised.

‘I am not a judge of painting,’ he said, affectedly.

‘Nor I of character,’ she answered at once, ‘so I don’t profess to criticise you.’

Jack was ready for her.

‘But it doesn’t prevent me thinking your picture charming.’

She laughed.

‘Well done, Mr. Balstoun. You scored that time.’

She was very well satisfied. She was keeping him at heel, and knew that the spell was upon him. Curiously enough, in the midst of her care on this account, pure vanity intervened. She felt vexed that he volunteered no admiration for her work, much as he showed towards herself.

‘This is wretched,’ she cried; ‘I can’t

paint a bit now :’ and, impulsively, she spread a daub of red paint across the least appropriate part of the canvas.

‘Miss Palliser, what are you doing?’ Jack exclaimed, starting forward.

‘It’s no good,’ she said, angrily. ‘I have worked at this beastly thing till I hate the sight of it, and it’s bad now. Even you haven’t anything to say for it.’

‘I have said I think it charming,’ Jack protested.

‘That is like saying a man means well. You damn with faint praise. I sha’n’t try any more ;’ and she threw down her brush with a gesture of impatience.

‘I think it remarkably good,’ said Jack, again. ‘The colour is admirable.’

‘Why didn’t you say so then?’ demanded Miss Palliser.

‘I didn’t know you cared for flattery,’ said Jack.

Miss Palliser laughed savagely as she wiped her brushes.

‘It would be an odd person who didn’t,’ she said.

The storm passed over, and she proposed that they should have tea. Her provisions were at the inn, and Jack fetched them. They boiled water over a spirit-lamp; unpacked cakes and strawberries: and sat down together on the grass for a sociable meal. Edith Palliser ate her strawberries and watched the kettle; Jack watched her. It could not be helped: she was irresistible. Her language might be unguarded, her conduct not always circumspect; but there were many women in London town, who never uttered a questionable word or committed the slightest indiscretion, that were less lovable than she. Give them Miss Palliser’s eyes and voice and manner: then very likely they would appear lovable

likewise. Under existing human conditions the Pallisers have the advantage.

Jack Balstoun lolled on the grass and gave himself up to her fascination. He thought of Mrs. Dasent and of Agatha; reflected on his devotion to the former and on the appeal by means of which Agatha had seemed to throw him back on that devotion a few hours since. He thought of it calmly as of something long outlived, something that had happened years ago.

‘You had better be quick,’ said Miss Palliser, looking up, ‘or you will find all the strawberries gone.’

He put out his hand and took one that she offered him.

‘I am not going to rob you of your tea,’ he said. ‘I don’t suppose you prepared for visitors.’

‘Aren’t you horrified at so much food for one person?’ she asked. ‘I eat enorm-

ously ; I couldn't keep going without it, and I can't bear feeling tired.'

It may not be artistic to represent a lady in the moment of conquest eating plum cake ; but there she was : and human beings are sometimes so impervious to right feeling that these violations of propriety do not affect them. Jack felt no repulsion at the spectacle : this was one charming eccentricity the more.

Nothing was said about his walk : that project had been added to his list of good intentions gone wrong. They sat and chatted contentedly ; not about love and death, but things utterly trivial, yet almost as interesting—the foam ever uppermost on the waters of life. When it was time to go home, Jack rose with a sigh.

'This has been a jolly afternoon,' he said, 'can't we come again ? To-morrow, for instance ?'

‘I can’t,’ said Miss Palliser. ‘John Forbes has got a party: we are to dine somewhere down the river, and have fireworks afterwards. My father is furious with me for going.’

‘Why?’ asked Jack.

‘It may be a little mixed,’ she answered, ‘he has got a funny party.’

‘Then why on earth do you go? Can’t you throw him over?’ asked Jack.

‘Why should I?’ she demanded.

‘Because you ought not to go. You give yourself away,’ he urged.

‘I don’t care; it amuses me. He got up the party on purpose for me.’

‘Then how can you be surprised at people talking about you?’ he said.

‘I am not,’ replied Miss Palliser. ‘As I said before, I don’t care if they do.’

‘Miss Palliser,’ exclaimed Jack, ‘I can’t make you out: you are as complex

as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Nobody would imagine that you, who have been talking to me here, were the same person who does the maddest things of anyone in London.'

'Who cares?' said Miss Palliser, carelessly, as she shut up her paint-box.

'I do for one,' he answered, excitedly.

She laughed and shook her head.

'Do you mind carrying those things for me?' she said. 'I can give you a lift back to London, of course.'

Jack took the different implements belonging to her, and packed the tea-basket. The pony stood ready harnessed at the inn, and they set out homewards.

It was cool and pleasant driving through Richmond Park. Cockney couples and roe deer, more graceful than these, shared the seclusion of bracken and forest glade: Jack was brimming over with adulation of

eye and lip. He adored her for the moment, and longed to tell her so.

‘I wish you would give up Forbes’s party to-morrow,’ he said, seriously.

She ridiculed the idea.

‘What nonsense: it will be great fun.’

‘You must know it won’t do,’ he answered. ‘No one could afford to do that sort of thing.’

She answered more gravely than before.

‘You are too late, Mr. Balstoun: it is no use counting the cost now. My father calls me horrible names sometimes: that isn’t likely to hinder me. No one else is affected by what I do.’

‘You are wrong,’ said Jack. ‘You have plenty of friends, if you will only believe in them.’

They were approaching Sheen Gate. Through it there passed a carriage in which, as it swept by, they saw a lady

notorious for her perseverance in social pursuits. She went everywhere, knew everyone, and repeated everything.

‘There’s Lady Smalley,’ said Miss Paliser. ‘I suppose she is going to see some one down here. By to-morrow it will be common knowledge in Richmond and London that I am trying to catch you. She will put the worst construction on it; everyone will accept her word. That is the character they have given me. It is no use trying to get rid of it now: I may as well get all the amusement it entitles me to.’

Her voice was sadder than he had ever known it; he was stung with compassion.

‘You shan’t be treated like that,’ he declared. ‘I know how good you are: be my wife, and your good name shall be my care, and I will defend it against the world.’

She heard him without a sign of emotion. In the calmest tones she answered—

‘Yes, Jack : if you wish it.’

Their drive was continued under embarrassing conditions. Passages of affection were impossible in public thoroughfares, and as soon as they reached a cabstand, Jack left her, promising to call in the morning at her father’s house. He watched her depart ; then followed in a hansom. It was a grave situation : he hardly realized what he had done. Passion and impulse had carried him off his feet, and he had taken a plunge which a little time ago would have seemed in his eyes utter self-sacrifice. However, it was taken, and he was not ashamed of it. Not he : he had won the most lovely and straightforward woman alive. He would have been a fool to hesitate.

With beating heart he reached his

rooms. He gave the cabman double fare : one does not get engaged every day ; then he ran up to Arthur's room. He flung open the door : Arthur was smoking a cigar on the sofa.

‘ There you are,’ he cried, getting up. ‘ I’ve news for you, Jack. She’s come home : she made sure the husband had bolted to England, so she followed. I heard this morning, but you had just gone out when I came in.’

‘ How long had I gone ?’ asked Jack. His voice was hoarse.

‘ Two minutes ; so Jenkins said.’

Two minutes. If he had heard the news in his state of mind after leaving Agatha, he would have been at Mrs. Dasent’s side before this. Two minutes had made the difference ; and what a difference !

‘ Had I just gone out ?’ he asked.

‘Just gone. Jenkins didn’t know where. What have you been doing?’

Jack replied promptly.

‘I am engaged to Miss Palliser.’

Arthur Balstoun lay back on his sofa and stared at his nephew. Jack’s eyes were on the floor: he felt his only chance of tranquillity lay in permanent disappearance beneath its unruffled surface.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. DASENT COMES BACK AGAIN.

NEXT day Jack went to Brook Street and saw Colonel Palliser. He had no reason to doubt that his proposal would be acceptable; nevertheless, it was not a duty to be performed without concern. Edith's father heard him quietly, and gave his consent without ado.

‘Of course, I am very glad,’ he said. ‘Have you said anything to your father about it?’

‘No,’ said Jack, ‘I haven’t had an opportunity.’

‘What are you going to do—write to him?’

Jack, for some reason quite inexplicable, blurted out—

‘Perhaps I had better go down to Balstoun.’

It was wrong choosing to leave his *fiancée*: in the hour of triumph he had every motive for desiring her company. It exercised a potent charm over him. And yet he had an inclination to run away. From whom or from what he could hardly have said; unless it were from himself.

He went upstairs again after the interview, and spent an hour with Edith. Then he thought he would stay in London; stay and intoxicate himself with her strong influence. He said nothing about going to Balstoun. Anyhow, he would dine with them to-night; of course, John Forbes was thrown over.

A few minutes after Jack had left the house the door-bell was rung, and before Edith could say she wished to see nobody, Major Cruttle was announced. He was a solid-built Briton, with blue eyes and square jaw; the sort of man that moves slowly but goes surely. He put his hat on a table and shook Edith's hand with a firm grasp.

'You told me,' he began, very quietly, 'that there was nothing between you and that boy.'

She laughed nervously.

'It was quite true.'

'I hear you drove to Richmond and back together,' he went on.

'That's a lie, we didn't.'

He took no notice, and continued—

'I have just met him leaving the house. What am I to think now?'

'Whatever you choose,' she broke out,

angrily. 'I'm not going to be catechised by you. What right have you to interfere with me?'

'Only this,' he answered, gravely, 'that I have asked you to marry me many times, and you have always encouraged me to hope.'

'Well, I am sorry to disappoint you, but it is no use your hoping. It was true, when you asked me, that there was nothing between Mr. Balstoun and me; it wasn't true I drove him to Richmond and back yesterday: we met accidentally at Ham. However, it is a fact now that I am going to marry him: and there's an end of it.'

Major Cruttle was over forty, and rather bald, but he was still a young man. There was nothing incongruous in his devotion to a girl of twenty-two. Now she had accepted a lad of her own age, and the strong

man's pride helped him to swallow his disappointment. He sat silent a moment ; then rose and took up his hat.

‘Forgive me, Miss Palliser, for having spoken too plainly. I congratulate you : I hope you will be very happy.’

She took his hand and kept it.

‘Don't be too tragic,’ she said. ‘I don't want to think I have behaved badly to you. You have always been kind to me, and I like you very much indeed.’

‘Unfortunately I imagined you were capable of another kind of feeling. Don't imagine I am blaming you : it was foolish of me.’

‘You are paying me out now. You might just as well say outright that I have played fast and loose with you. You mean that I kept you hanging on as a last resource, and took Jack because it was a better chance : don't you ?’

He made a deprecating sign.

‘I hope I should never say that to a lady,’ he answered.

‘No, you wouldn’t: you are too generous. But you mustn’t be hard on me. It’s quite natural, isn’t it, that I should fall in love with Jack Balstoun? He is a little original, which is a great recommendation; and he’s very nice.’

It was a cold-blooded speech as she made it: she might almost have added: ‘I think, on the whole, I may as well accept Balstoun Castle: it will do.’

Major Cruttle really knew little of Jack. He had regarded him as a danger to his own prospects, but could not withhold a certain personal liking. Whether he was capable of dominating Edith Palliser was another thing. Major Cruttle had set himself that task, and knew from experience how hard it was. He had cherished

a hope that firmness of character and purpose would have given him a victory in the end, and he had constantly looked forward to finding an ideal wife in the woman who was so oddly compounded of mischief and charm. He knew her weaknesses better than most people; he loved her more passionately than any. Without disdain or jealousy he had tried to study this new attachment, and he was convinced it was a midsummer madness. From what he had observed, as well as from what he had just heard, he felt sure that it sprang on her side from head as well as heart. She liked Jack's Windlaw freak: it had especial merit in a person with such temptations to be as other gilded youths. An heir of Balstoun with a touch of eccentricity had taken her fancy: her general trouble was that these men were so dull compared with their

younger brothers. As for Jack, he was enslaved as a dozen others had been by her surface charm. None of them had been in earnest according to Cruttle's ideas; all of them had wearied and dropped away save he alone. He knew that calculation might lead her to choose any suitor who was particularly eligible: she was frankly alive to the advantages of marrying well. He had been equally fearful lest she should elope for a whim with some unusually attractive pauper. It seemed that she had fallen somewhere between the two: she had begun by securing Jack's allegiance because he was a young man to be considered: she was now inclined to make a romance out of it: invent a grand passion out of a passing fancy. It was a decisive combination. However, he had clearly no remedy: he could only bow to her decision; and go.

If he had been able to follow Jack's movements, his indignation would have been greater; and not without cause. Whilst he was walking along the pavement of Park Lane in blank despair, Jack was speeding up Oxford Street in a fever of excitement. Cruttle would have had no reason to object to elation on his rival's part, but it might have gone to his heart had he known that it was excited not by Edith Palliser, whose favour he himself would have purchased at any cost, but by another woman. Jack had been seized with a craving to see Mrs. Dasent again; he could not wait to learn her address from his uncle, so he had jumped into a cab and drove off to her old quarters in hope of finding her. Edith Palliser was beautiful and enchanting, oh, yes: but in his innermost heart he was conscious of a vibration comparable to the beautiful melody which,

in legends, awakens the sleeper from his trance. He told himself that he was only going to acquaint an old friend with his new good fortune. She had returned from a long journey ; civility required that he should call on her—now that the past was covered by later events. For the sake of that past he ought to let her know that he had at last found his place in life. In short he argued with himself that it was a natural and becoming thing to do, to call on Mrs. Dasent, and he did his best to persuade himself that he was setting about it without any ruffling of nerves or conscience.

At the moment when he was knocking at her door, Major Cruttle was trying to compute the pitch of rapture attained by Edith's chosen suitor. She, with something of a gambler's haste, was addressing an announcement of her engagement to

the *Morning Post*: whether this was seemingly, or would please Jack, she did not pause to consider.

A maid-of-all-work opened the door to Jack, who could hardly credit his senses when he found himself being admitted to Mrs. Dasent's presence. No amount of philosophic calm could stop his heart from beating wildly; he was positively nervous. He passed into the neat sitting-room where Arthur Balstoun had paid more than one visit, and found himself face to face with the woman who had so strongly influenced his life.

Mrs. Dasent turned quickly on hearing him announced, and for a moment they confronted one another in silence. Boyish affection often dies for the same reason as the flower of the seed sown in stony places—it is premature and superficial. Frequently it is dispelled by fading looks on

the part of the lady, or maturing judgment on that of the man. Sometimes it vanishes in the glamour of expanding life. Generally its disappearance is simply due to human inconstancy. Here are some alternative explanations of Jack's conduct. He was less likely than most young men to find the grand ladies of London put to shame his old love by the Scottish border ; one glance sufficed to banish any notion of faded looks. No one rejected on such grounds as he had been could be fairly rebuked for inconstancy : it remains therefore to decide, or to avoid deciding, whether Jack's passion had been superficial, or whether his judgment had matured. He had, of course, outgrown his old passion, and given light to a new flame : of that he could allow no question.

But Mrs. Dasent was ignorant of all this. She only knew that Jack had re-

turned to his friends, and had no notion that he had done more. At first she was fearful lest he might have come to urge his avowals, and declare that silence and absence were impossible. Till she was assured of this, her attitude was a little stiff.

Jack sat down and tried to recover presence of mind. They blundered through the commonplaces: he explained how he had learnt of her arrival; talked volubly of ships and the weather. Mrs. Dasent gathered confidence, and began putting questions about himself. He unfolded the story of his life on Windlaw, and took mighty high ground in accounting for his lapse of intention. He had felt it his duty to take part in the human comedy, so he had dropped in to see how life was going amongst men. She told him frankly about her husband: how she had sought for him

in vain, and had finally concluded, from certain clues, that he had come to England. In despair of finding him abroad she had come home as the last resource. She gave a cheerful account of herself; the story of a quiet, brave woman in adversity. She inquired affectionately after Balstoun and its inmates, with the exception of Miss Mirabel, of whom she said nothing. Little by little they drew together, and found less difficulty in saying what they meant.

‘I was so glad to find you,’ said Jack.
‘I was anxious to see you at once.’

‘It was nice of you. It is pleasant to know that one’s friends are glad to see one.’

‘I wanted to tell you something,’ said Jack.

She guessed instinctively.

‘You are going to be married,’ she cried, leaning towards him.

He admitted his felicity with a peculiarly hangdog air, and she drew back again evidently impressed.

‘Oh, Jack, I am so glad,’ she said. ‘I have been longing to hear of it: now everything will be right. Tell me all about her: have you been engaged long? Is Sir John delighted? And Agatha?’

His face grew more gloomy than ever as she made her congratulations, and there was something not quite appropriate to the occasion. There was a strain and a lack of the unclouded joyousness that ought to attach to talk of an engagement.

Jack began an awkward explanation beginning with the lady’s name.

‘It only happened yesterday,’ he said: ‘we met quite by chance.’

‘But that didn’t make you propose to her.’

‘No,’ said Jack, smiling dolefully; ‘but

I didn't know it would happen yesterday. I haven't had time to tell my father yet.'

'I am sure he will be pleased,' she said, at a loss for a better remark.

'I hope so,' said Jack, and apparently had nothing more to say.

'But tell me all about her,' said Mrs. Dasent, anxious to ease matters. 'I want very much to know. What is she like? have you known her for a long time? is she very clever? Describe her to me.'

'She is beautiful and not half as bad as people say.'

Mrs. Dasent was astonished.

'What do you mean?'

'Only that people say unkind things of her,' said Jack, doggedly; 'that she is fast and bad form, and so on. But it isn't true: it isn't true, and it isn't fair. If she had a proper chance she would be as good as any of them. She has been oddly

brought up, that's all. I mean she has had nobody to take care of her except her father, who I am afraid isn't a very reputable sort of person. But you must know her: I want you to be friends with her. I hope you will like her.'

'I am sure I shall,' she answered, kindly. 'I am sure any woman you thought fit for your wife would be nice.'

Then she paused and blushed, recollecting that she was included in this flattering generalization. To change the subject, she went on:

'I suppose you will be a great deal at Balstoun. I am so glad for Agatha: it will be delightful for her—and for your wife,' she added, with something like a tinge of regret.

Jack winced. He remembered his sister's protest: also the views Edith Palliser had expounded only yesterday as to the

dreariness of country life compared with life in London.

‘Has anyone got my house?’ asked Mrs. Dasent. ‘Dear little house, I should like to see it again. I hope they take care of the garden, whoever they are.’

‘It is empty at present,’ said Jack. ‘Father has kept it unlet for some reason. I have not been there since you left—rather since I went there and found you had left,’ he added, pointedly. Then, fearing he was getting into danger, he went on, ‘Where are you going to live now?’

‘I think I shall stay here,’ she answered. ‘London is the centre of everything: I must begin my search here, at all events. Besides, it is the only hiding-place in England: people are not inquisitive. It is not very lovely,’ she continued, looking round the room: ‘a poor little

place, isn't it, compared with my Balstoun home? But one accustoms oneself to things when they are inevitable. I need not complain.'

Jack let his thoughts wander back to old scenes and associations. It seemed like a recollection of far-off days, the life at Balstoun before troubles began. He wished he could live backwards instead of forwards; the past was so dear to him.

'Isn't it funny,' he said, 'when you think of it—not one living soul knows what his future is going to be. You and I had little idea eighteen months ago that we should be talking like this so soon. I wonder we are not all afraid to go on living.'

'My dear friend,' she expostulated, 'it is not for you to say that. You have fallen on your feet, at all events.'

'Of course,' he said, hastily, 'only things

always seem so nice when they have gone out of reach. And they generally frighten one before they happen.'

'You are not afraid of getting married?' she asked, with a laugh.

'Of course not,' he replied. 'No one ever is. They see people getting on as badly as possible all round them, but they always take it for granted that they will get on well. I only know one man who was impressed by the solemnity of the thing; he told me he was perfectly happy, but if he had known what an awful business it was, he would never have attempted it.'

'What did he mean?' asked Mrs. Dasent, amused.

'I think the lawyers frightened him,' said Jack.

'Don't let them frighten you,' she answered.

'Oh, I don't care. I am hardened; my

nerves ought to stand anything by this time : and as for enthusiasms, I've outgrown them.'

'Come,' she said, 'you mustn't talk like that. I don't like cynics.'

'Have you kept all your illusions?' he asked.

'Every one. I always look at the bright sides. You mustn't make a black side and then turn it uppermost. That is not the way to get on.'

She spoke in her old gentle tone, her manner kind and frank. Here was beyond doubt a haven of contentment in a troubled sea of men. Such calmness and beauty in circumstances that might well have bred bitterness must needs radiate. It came as a terrible revelation to Jack. He contrasted this woman so purely refined, so gentle and unselfish, with his affianced bride. He ran over a catalogue of her

weaknesses to which he had not as yet paid serious attention; her smoking in public places, her slang and occasional use of strong oaths, the unblushing eagerness with which she would bet, operating through anyone that came handy, however slender their acquaintance. All these evidences of character and spirit, as he had regarded them, assumed a new aspect as he sat opposite Mrs. Dasent and pondered on the impossibility of her behaving so. He remembered how, at the Crystal Palace, Edith had pushed the joke against poor Gilmer to such unwarrantable lengths: conceive Mrs. Dasent doing that! He reflected that even to-night she was engaged for an ill-advised adventure as John Forbes's guest: imagine Mrs. Dasent at such a gathering! He sat in bewilderment. His first instinct was to fling himself at Mrs. Dasent's feet, and cry out that

he had done a mad thing. But he knew that he was committed past recall; that honour and character were at stake. He could not look back now.

He rose to go.

‘Good-bye, Con,’ he said. ‘I am glad you were the first person I told. You are right: one has to make the best of things. I am to be married and——’ He came to a stop, not knowing exactly what he meant to say. ‘You wish me luck, don’t you?’

‘Indeed I do,’ she said, sweetly. ‘No one cares for your happiness more than I do.’

He bent down and kissed her hand.

‘I may come to see you again, may I not?’

‘Of course. And am I to see Miss Palliser?’ she asked.

‘Yes: I will manage that,’ he said. In his heart he felt that he would do every-

thing in his power to keep them apart.

As he walked home, he came to a sudden resolution. He felt a craving to get on; he was utterly restless. There was only one thing to do—go to Balstoun and tell his father. He did not want to dine quietly with Edith; he could not go and see Mrs. Dasent again. He went to the club and wrote the former lady a note, saying that he thought it best upon the whole to go and see his father at once. He excused himself very prettily, and shortly afterwards he was flying through the darkness in a northward-bound express.

CHAPTER IV.

JACK AND HIS FATHER DISAGREE.

JACK arrived home in the small hours of the morning, and was ready to meet his family at breakfast. Sir John as usual received him in a friendly way: perhaps he was more than commonly civil. Agatha looked pale and not over-strong; her pleasure was great. As for Miss Mirabel, she came down late, and extended to Jack a generous welcome to her sphere of influence. He paid little attention to her: his head was too full of his own matrimonial affairs to allow of calculations

about her and Sir John. At this moment he was more concerned with Agatha: he did not relish the idea of telling her of his engagement.

Jack observed in the first place that Miss Mirabel was in charge of the tea-pot; not Agatha. He had a twofold objection to this: he preferred making his own tea or coffee at the sideboard; and he thought his sister ought to perform the duty, if it were done by anybody in particular.

‘How has London agreed with you, Jack?’ enquired the father. ‘You look a little fine-drawn. None of us Balstouns get fat.’

‘I’m all right,’ said Jack. ‘Agatha’s the person to consider. Have you followed my *régime*?’ he added, turning to her.

She seemed to dislike speaking of herself, and answered shortly that she was much better.

‘Agatha is in good hands here,’ said the Baronet, bowing towards Miss Mirabel. ‘Better hands than Jane Diggle’s; she would wear out anyone in time.’

‘I mustn’t hear a word against Aunt Jane,’ said Agatha. ‘She has been a good friend to me.’

‘That sounds as if I were the reverse,’ said Miss Mirabel, raising her eyes deprecatingly.

‘Wait until father attacks you, and then see what I shall say,’ answered Agatha.

Miss Mirabel looked at Sir John, and laughed pleasantly.

The butler came in to say that a Waterdale tradesman had come to take some orders. Miss Mirabel at once rose. Sir John seemed disinclined to stir; Agatha evidently did not expect to be consulted: there was no doubt as to where lay the executive power in the household.

As soon as she had gone, Sir John, with a preliminary cough, made the following statement :

‘ My dear children, I am very glad to have you here, because I wish to confide to you a serious intention which I have formed. It has been borne in on my mind with entire conviction that my marriage with the lady who has just left the room would be a source of happiness to all of us.’

The brother and sister drew each a long breath, and neither dared look at the other. Sir John resumed :

‘ I am now saved from the prospect of a lonely old age ; you will feel no responsibility on my account. I shall be well cared for, and Balstoun will have a mistress worthy of it. I meant to have spoken to you of this earlier, Jack, but I did not doubt it would be agreeable to

you, so I didn't feel bound to wait. Now I am glad to take you both into my confidence.'

There was a dreadful silence; both his hearers kept their eyes fast upon the ground. Sir John looked at his son, and a frown of apprehension stole across his face. He had looked forward anxiously to this interview: he would have given anything to have his son's approval; it seemed it was to be denied him. He turned appealingly to his daughter.

'Aren't you obliged to me, Agatha, for finding you such a charming stepmother?'

She raised a pale face to him and answered—

'I hope that whatever you do will be for your happiness.'

She could hardly grasp the full purport of it; the idea of a stepmother was so unexpectedly repugnant. There was a

momentary calm, the forerunner of a storm, which broke first from Jack.

‘Is it a settled thing, father?’ he enquired.

‘I think so, Jack. I had intended, as I say, letting you know in advance, but I did not consider it so necessary as to make a delay imperative.’

‘I wish you had,’ said Jack ; and, seeing his father said nothing, he added, ‘I should have begged you to refrain. I should have protested as strongly as possible.’

The fact was, Sir John had fully intended waiting until Jack came home, but Miss Mirabel had grown impatient. She had played her fish to the bank, and was for landing him at once. Sir John wondered whether he could hit on any delicate phrase suggesting to Jack that he had satisfied himself of the lady’s mind acci-

dentally. But he felt this must more or less suggest that she had proposed to him, and he had no intention of giving himself away. Jack's last remark put the notion of a conciliatory speech further from his mind.

‘Those are two different things,’ he said. ‘Protest is a strong word.’

‘Not too strong,’ said Jack, hotly. ‘I may as well say at once that I can never approve of the step you mean to take.’

Sir John's manner became rigid.

‘I haven't asked you to yet,’ he said. ‘I believe I am capable of judging for myself. I inform you of what I do: if you think fit to object, we must agree to differ.’

Jack was angry.

‘Somebody warned me of this,’ he said, ‘but I didn't think it possible: I didn't imagine you could make such a mistake.’

I consider that as your son I am entitled to try and stop you from bringing discredit on yourself and your family. I object for Agatha's sake, too : it is unjust to her.'

'Never mind Agatha,' said Sir John, sternly. 'Don't bring in your sister to cover your insolence.'

Agatha had listened hitherto in dismay. She now interjected an inarticulate cry : she had nothing to say ; but the sight of these two men quarrelling appalled her.

'I can take care of myself, I don't want any screening,' retorted Jack ; 'but, if I don't stand by Agatha, it is easy to see no one else will. And, as it happens, my hands are full already. I have been making plans as well as you. You objected to my first engagement ; I have engaged myself to somebody else, and I came here to tell you so.' He paused to take breath, and his two listeners now fixed their eyes

on him. Jack made an effort and exclaimed, 'I am engaged to Edith Palliser.'

He had fired the shot, and waited for its effect.

'Oh, Jack!' exclaimed Agatha, in such a wail of distress that his heart sank within him.

Sir John looked at her closely.

'Who is she?' he asked.

There was no mistaking his daughter's manner. He put the question suspiciously.

'She is daughter of Colonel Palliser: you know him, I believe,' said Jack.

'Tom Palliser,' said the Baronet, with ominous emphasis.

'Yes. I hope you approve of this connection, at all events.'

'I don't know about that,' Sir John answered, gravely. 'It's a bad family; there's hardly a respectable one amongst them. Tom is a blackguard, and always

was. Even I have heard stories of his daughter. Can you tell me honestly she bears a good name in London?’

‘I knew you’d object,’ cried Jack, getting up and crossing to the window. ‘I don’t suppose I should ever satisfy you, but it’s my turn to have my way. I am pledged to this, and I mean to abide by it.’

Sir John grew suddenly calm as his son became hotter. He seemed to drop his own case and prepare to grapple with his son’s.

‘Wait a moment, my boy,’ he said. ‘You might, at all events, tell me a little more before you put me at defiance.’

‘You have already decided against me,’ said Jack.

‘The burden of proof lies rather with you,’ answered his father. ‘I am certainly disposed to withhold my consent at

present; but perhaps you can persuade me I am wrong.'

'You took little trouble to treat me in the same way,' retorted Jack. 'You implied I might consent or not as I chose: you didn't care.'

'The fact that I am father and you are son makes some difference, doesn't it?' inquired the Baronet.

Jack laughed savagely.

'You need hardly ask me that: you know where the power lies: you pointed it out to me once before.

Sir John reflected a moment.

'You are hitting wildly,' he said: 'that taunt was unnecessary. You will assure me, won't you, that this young lady is one whom I should be glad to welcome? You have not told me a word about her yet.'

Jack turned his eyes involuntarily to-

wards Agatha. She sat silent and quite still, her hands lying listlessly before her. She wondered vaguely what she had done to be put in such a predicament. It was bad enough to be unable to like her father's engagement. Now she found her brother had committed himself, and the uncompromising warning which she had administered to him rose up in dreadful distinctness to embarrass her. It was grievous beyond measure to see her father and brother wrangling like this because neither would approve of the marriage of the other; and, to make the situation more painfully complete, she reflected that she had herself rejected an offer of marriage which would probably have been considered as desirable as the other two were deemed the reverse. However, this was a secret not to be revealed, and she had borne a silent part in the scene about

which there hung a certain ghastly humour. Now, to her dismay, Sir John appealed to her.

‘If you won’t speak, Jack, let me ask Agatha: she’s not likely to be hard on you. Tell me, Agatha, are you in favour of this?’

She neither moved nor looked up. In a low voice she said,

‘Jack knows what I think.’

It was a dreadful moment. Her evident trouble stopped Jack’s rage: he hung in a dilemma between a stubborn attitude towards his father and gentle conciliation towards her.

‘What am I to think, Jack?’ asked Sir John, quietly.

‘Why should you not trust me?’ asked Jack, in turn.

‘I do, my dear fellow, implicitly. But one is not always a free agent in these

matters: it is possible you have come under the influence of a designing and unworthy woman. Ought I not to try to help you out of it?’

‘My dear father, that is so exactly my feeling towards you that the situation becomes ridiculous.’

Sir John almost blushed: the retort fell with such true edge.

‘In your present frame of mind,’ he said, ‘perhaps that is a natural thing to say. You are excited, but you must not make that insinuation again: I can’t let it pass a second time.’

‘That’s all very well,’ said Jack, ‘but look at facts. You are left alone in the house with a woman whom we all admit to be charming, which is about all we do know about her. It is very natural she should wish to marry you, and of course she makes the most of her opportunity.’

Knowing you as well as I do, and knowing also that last year you—didn't intend marrying her, I never thought she would make much way with you. I don't consider it is a proper marriage for you, father: I wonder you think it so. How do you like the idea of people saying that you have been married by your daughter's governess? It's not fair to us. We can hardly like to accept such a step-mother after the way in which we have thought of our own mother; that's what I meant by speaking of Agatha. We have got on very well all these years; don't let us have changes now.'

'You are reading me a fine lecture,' said Sir John, 'but I believe I know the world pretty nearly as well as you do. The fact that Miss Mirabel has been here as governess is not to her discredit, I believe. She is a lady of unblemished career;

one that would do honour to any position. I am not going to measure my conduct by public gossip. As for having no change, that's pure selfishness on your part, Jack. I am not the only man who has chosen to marry a second time. Old age does not wear a brighter prospect when it comes to a lonely man. I don't suppose you two want to stop and nurse me continually.'

Here Agatha broke in: her nerves were overstrung, and she began to cry.

'I don't want to go away any more,' she sobbed. 'I will stay here with you.'

'What nonsense this is,' he said, kindly patting her shoulder. 'I can't understand you. What has put you against Miss Mirabel? Come, Agatha, what makes you so unhappy?'

Tears prevented her speaking; she sobbed so violently that her whole frame shook; she blew her nose and made ugly

noises, and altogether added considerably to this discomfort of the situation. Jack knew very well he was mainly responsible for her grief, and had not the least idea what to do. He hated to see her cry, and did not see how he was to console her. Much to his relief, and Sir John's indignation, she abruptly left the room, banging the door with hysterical violence.

Sir John turned back to his son.

‘I am afraid we agree, at all events, in offending her,’ he said. ‘Now, frankly, are you in earnest about this young lady?’

‘Certainly.’

‘You have engaged yourself to her?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was it a sudden resolve, or had you been intending it for some time?’

Jack felt guilty.

‘I don't act in a hurry,’ he said.

‘All the same I may remind you,’ said Sir John, ‘it is not very long since we were differing concerning another project of yours.’

‘Again I can make a *tu quoque*, father,’ said Jack.

‘Well, I give you this. I would gladly consent to the first to save you from the second, if the former were a possibility, and if my impression is right.’

‘What impression?’ asked Jack.

‘You probably don’t know anything of the Pallisers: it’s ancient history to me. I knew Tom Palliser well enough thirty years ago. He was a good-looking fellow, but a thorough scamp. Plenty of people disliked playing with him; he ran away with the wife of one of his best friends: he married this girl’s mother entirely for her money, which he spent in no time; and finally he treated her so infernally

ill, because she was no one in particular, that it was always said she died simply of grief.' He paused; then as Jack said nothing he resumed: 'I heard of him quite lately from someone who was here, that he was bringing out a daughter who had all the Palliser vices, and that she was quite likely to trap and ruin any young fellow of good prospects. Of course Tom will have the property, but it is smothered with mortgages, and in a shocking state, I hear. The present man is out of court altogether; no one goes near him in his own county. How they all live is a mystery to me; but one needn't wonder at anything; they never were scrupulous. Now, Jack, you can't be astonished at my not being pleasantly surprised at your news.'

Jack was subdued. He answered, quietly:

‘Of course that’s all news to me about her people ; but after all I don’t see that it matters. We don’t want money and we needn’t have anything to do with them. It would be monstrous that a girl should suffer for her parent’s past sins. It is not wonderful that hard things should be said ; people like turning over that sort of refuse, but Edith doesn’t deserve to be treated like that.’

‘Do you mind telling me why Agatha is sorry? She evidently dislikes the idea.’

‘She shares the common prejudice, I suppose,’ said Jack.

‘Then you admit there is an unfavourable impression about?’ answered Sir John.

‘You know what that’s worth,’ said Jack, doggedly.

‘It isn’t far out as a rule,’ said Sir John. ‘People don’t take the trouble to

get a bad name for nothing. What does your Aunt Jane say about her?’

‘She hates her,’ said Jack at once, ‘but then she’s full of fancies.’

‘Possibly. But Agatha apparently doesn’t care for her, and she isn’t fanciful. Jack, are you sure you are not deceiving yourself? Is Miss Palliser the sort of woman you would expect your sister to like; that’s not a bad test. Is she the sort of woman you would bring here without misgiving: the sort of woman you want to see mistress here?’

Jack hung his head.

‘It is no use I am afraid, father. I fell in love with Miss Palliser and asked her to be my wife. You mustn’t thwart me this time.’

Sir John took a turn across the room.

‘I am very sorry,’ he said. ‘From what I know at present, I am afraid I must

object. I would rather not talk any more just now: we had better both of us think a little. Besides, they want to clear away breakfast.'

A day of dreadful strain ensued. Agatha reappeared at lunch-time looking miserable. Sir John had apparently confided the turn of events to Miss Mirabel. She was perfectly civil and conventional, but there was a defiant air about her that implied she had cleared decks for action. It was a stiff ordeal; nobody spoke much, and applied themselves to their food with unusual avidity.

When they left the room, Miss Mirabel said to Jack—

'Will you let me know whether you are going to stay?'

'Thank you,' he said, politely. 'I will arrange with my servant: don't you bother.'

Miss Mirabel flamed up, and looked

quite noble in her rage. Tact, however, reminded her that a scene at this crisis would never do, and she surrendered. Jack felt that he had given her a nasty one, and was happy. It put him in good trim for an interview with Sir John.

This happened in the Baronet's room, and was destined to be remembered with regret by both of them. Jack told his father that if he was going to make the whole family ridiculous by allowing himself to be married by the governess, it would no longer be possible for his son to remain in the house. Sir John replied that he was old enough to judge for himself, and had a perfect right to act as he chose: that if Jack could not be civil to his father's wife, he had better keep away. Furthermore, that he could never countenance his son's alliance with a young lady of second-rate repute, belonging to a family of no repute

at all: that he was a young fool to get caught by the first good-looking girl that laid a trap for him, and that if he chose to marry such a girl he must be good enough to keep her to himself, and not bring his wife to Balstoun more than would be necessary.

‘I shall satisfy myself,’ he said, ‘but there can’t be much doubt about it: Agatha’s evidence is good enough for me. If I can’t stop you, you shall have a thousand a year as long as I live; and mighty soon you’ll repent you of your folly.’

‘You seem to have made up your mind about my being a fool,’ said Jack. ‘You know the proverb: young fools are not the worst.’

‘Leave my room,’ thundered Sir John.

It was the first time things had ever come to this point between them, and they were both frightened at the gravity of it.

However, neither of them would give way, and Jack walked out.

‘I am going back to London,’ he said, as he left the room.

Sir John sat watching the door through which his son had passed with an agonised expression. These proud men feel desperately deep down in their hearts. He was in the position of having cut off his right hand because it offended him. It may be the proper thing to do, but the loss is grievous; not the less so because one has to pretend to be satisfied. His eyes wandered to the portrait of his first wife: he ran over in his mind the way things had gone since her death; all that he had hoped for, and in secret prayed for. At this moment life seemed a gross failure. However, there was one consolation for it all: he went to look for Miss Mirabel.

As for Jack, when he had left his

father's room he met Agatha in the hall. She drew him into the library and shut the door.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ she asked, reproachfully.

Jack took her hand in his.

‘I hadn’t the least idea of deceiving you, old thing : really I hadn’t. When we talked, I didn’t know how fond of her I was. We met by accident just afterwards, and then it couldn’t be helped.’

‘Are you perfectly certain?’ she asked, slowly.

‘What a stupid question,’ he answered, with a short laugh ; ‘of course I am. You will say you were wrong when you know her better.’

‘But, Jacky, can you ever forget what I said the other day?’

‘Never mind, dear. We will laugh about it one day. I tell you you will

change your mind. And,' he added, suddenly dropping his voice, 'Constance Dasent has come back : I've seen her.'

She repeated the words in astonishment; then added, shyly—

'Did you tell her?'

'Of course I did. She was the first person to know : wasn't that odd? It's all right : we understand each other perfectly.'

'Are you going to stay here, Jacky?' she asked.

'No. Father is impossible : we must keep apart. I have just told him what I think of him, and he has kicked me out of his room.'

'Oh, you haven't quarrelled with him?' cried Agatha. 'Don't make matters worse by doing that.'

'I don't want to quarrel with him,' said Jack ; 'but one must draw the line some-

where. Did you know he meant to marry Miss Mirabel? Arthur said something about it, but I didn't think it could be true.'

'It never occurred to me seriously,' she answered. 'It is too dreadful for anything. I have always got on with her very well, but I can't bear the idea of her being father's wife. Perhaps I was very dense not to suspect, but I suppose she was clever enough to hoodwink me. She has taken charge of everything for a long time now, and father seemed to accept it all as a matter of course. We had got into a groove, and it all seemed right and natural. I can't help looking on it as desecration: I won't call her mother.'

'You shan't have occasion. We will stop him somehow,' said Jack.

'And yet,' Agatha went on, thoughtfully, 'if I knew it would make father

very happy, I should hardly like to say much. I daresay one would get accustomed to it in time.'

'You are much too unselfish,' said Jack, smoothing her hair. 'You have a right to be considered, and your home sha'n't be spoilt if I can help it.'

'I must make the best of it, old boy. I don't want to prevent anybody being happy when there is a chance of it.'

'That's dreadfully doleful,' said Jack. 'Come, cheer up: I promise you I am not making such a mess of it as you imagine.' He supposed that her grief was mainly due to her concern for his happiness, and his feelings which she considered she had wounded. 'It's no use throwing up the sponge: let's pretend everything is just as we wish it to be; then we shall feel better. Father isn't married yet, remember.'

Agatha refused to be comforted; things

were about as bad as they could be, and she was undergoing a struggle between love and reason. Her father and brother both appeared to be doing wrong, yet it was not her nature to stop anyone in a chosen enterprise.

‘All I hope is that you will be happy, Jack : and father too. If I were sure of that I would swallow a step-mother, and try not to mind having spoken as I did to you.’

‘You are a dear old thing,’ said Jack, affectionately, ‘but I wish you wouldn’t talk so despondently. You seem to think there’s no chance of your being happy anyhow.’

‘Never mind me : I’m all right,’ she said.

‘Sure ?’ interrogated Jack. ‘Nothing wrong at all ?’

He wanted her to tell him about More-

combe : he felt sure there was something to tell. But Agatha shook her head firmly

‘ Don’t imagine worries, dear boy. You have got plenty of things to think of already.’

She clearly meant to reveal nothing, so Jack moved to go.

‘ I must get back to London,’ he said. ‘ I hardly like leaving you here. If you want me, send a telegram and I will come at once. Mind you do : I shan’t be happy unless you promise that.’

She smiled sadly, and said she would let him know if things became unbearable ; and Jack went straight off to the station.

CHAPTER V.

JACK IN ATTENDANCE.

SOME rather nasty correspondence ensued between Jack and his father. The latter was much angered by the notice of his son's engagement in the *Morning Post*. So was Jack, to tell the truth. He had appeared in Edith's presence with a remonstrance on his lips.

‘How on earth did the announcement get in the paper?’ he began.

‘Easily enough; I sent it,’ was her prompt reply.

‘But, I say, was that right? Wasn't it

rather funny to send it before I had spoken to my father.'

'You had spoken to mine,' she answered, gaily; 'it was practically settled, and I was impatient to see it in print. Doesn't it look nice? By the way, I only called you John; have you got any more names.'

'No, I am John, son of John; and John senior is a considerable person. I would rather have waited a day or two; it would have been kinder to him.'

'Anyhow you saw him before he got the paper, so it's all right,' said Edith, to conclude the matter.

'You haven't asked me yet what he said.'

Edith was waiting for this with no little trepidation, but she dissembled it under a cloak of cheerful confidence.

Jack felt uncomfortable.

'He doesn't seem as pleased as he ought to be,' he said, with forced merriment.

Edith did not look up.

‘ Did you expect him to be glad ? You knew very well what people would say : didn’t you suppose your father would take fright ? ’

‘ How was he to know,’ cried Jack. It was an invidious remark, and he hastened to mend it. ‘ I mean, even supposing you to be right, that people invent ill-natured things about you, which of course I don’t admit to be the case; even then, he wouldn’t hear of them.’

‘ Yet he objects,’ said Edith. ‘ What is his reason then ? ’

‘ He doesn’t wish me to get married yet,’ asserted Jack, for want of a better explanation.

She shook her head gravely.

‘ Come, you know that’s not the reason ; so do I. It was clear enough to me, Jack, what he would say. Don’t begin by treat-

ing me like a fool ; I'm not that. I knew very well that when he heard you had got engaged to Tom Palliser's daughter he would object. I have always been prepared for that. But I also made sure it would make no difference to you ; otherwise I should never have sent the notice to the paper. Of course, if you are convinced of your mistake, I have done wrong ; I ought not to have committed you.'

It was an adroit appeal, not only to his youthful spirit of chivalry, but to his pride as a man of character and decision. She had not gauged his susceptibilities in vain : she estimated that he would not much like to be regarded as vacillating and easily swayed, and that anyone who told him he was making a fool of himself would certainly fix him in his intention. She concluded that Sir John would probably be the first person to try and argue him out

of his engagement, and would certainly be the last to succeed. The fact of the announcement appearing in the paper might offend his sense of propriety for the moment, but it would add force to his determination. It was burning his bridges behind him.

Tom Palliser took an odd view of the situation. He pretended to be prodigiously affronted at Sir John's behaviour. He wrote the Baronet a long, incoherent letter, to which he received an unpleasantly curt and concise answer. Having eased himself of his wrath during certain days, he elected to engage his future son-in-law in serious colloquy.

'Now your father's blown off a bit,' he said, 'it's time we came to settlements. What does he mean to do?'

Jack had to make the unpleasant announcement that Sir John refused to settle

anything at all : or rather, he ingeniously put Colonel Palliser on his back by saying that he would make the same settlement as Edith's father, knowing very well that this would be precisely nothing. Colonel Palliser fumed and swore in a highly unbusiness-like manner ; but after many noble threats, he ended by declaring that his daughter should not suffer, and he would consent to the union without any settlements. This he did not so much because he was full of the Christian virtue of forgiveness, as because he was entirely empty of self-respect. As long as he could get his daughter decently married, he was not particular as to terms. He relied on it that old John Balstoun, when the deed was once done, would never let his heir go begging.

Edith approached the subject in a calculating mood.

‘Of course it’s a bore,’ she said, ‘but the old gentleman can’t live for ever: we must be all right in time.’

Jack couldn’t stand this.

‘I can’t agree to that, Edith. Whatever happens, I don’t want my father to die.’

‘Oh, very well, then our old man shall die: I shan’t mind. Then Palliser will belong to my father, and we can make it our home.’

‘And you will be happy living there quietly?’ asked Jack, in a solemn voice.

‘I shall love it. We will even go and live on Windlaw, if you like,’ she said, gaily. ‘Besides, things are never as bad as one expects; it will be all right somehow. When is your father going to be married?’

‘Next month, I believe,’ he answered, gloomily.

‘There’s no chance of putting him off?’ she enquired. Jack made a mournful dissent. ‘It is the deuce of a nuisance,’ said Edith, after a moment’s reflection. ‘There will be a dowager on the estate, anyhow; and if she has a lot of children, he will be pinching to provide for them.’

‘Edith, I wish you wouldn’t talk like that.’

‘I can’t help it, my dear: I must say what I mean.’

There was a ring at the door, and a footman came to know whether Miss Palliser would see Mr. Forbes.

‘John Forbes,’ she exclaimed. ‘Yes, let him come in.’

Jack’s face fell. He instinctively disliked John Forbes, and was already jealous of him; probably this was effect and cause. He was making every effort to check Edith’s tendency to talk and act

unlike other people, and this man had a reacting effect on her.

She was uncommonly pleased to see him.

‘Where have you been? I’ve not seen you for an age.’

Forbes was a big, brown man about thirty; very handsome, and always in spirits.

‘That’s a compliment,’ he said. ‘It’s only about ten days. I had to go into the country last week: besides, I suppose you aren’t going out much now.’

He held her hand during most of this answer, then gave a less tender grasp to Jack.

‘No,’ said Edith; ‘it’s dreadful being engaged, isn’t it, Jack? We spend our evenings at home, and bore one another, and go to sleep after dinner. Come and dine to-night, Mr. Forbes. Do: only ourselves: it will be nice.’

Forbes, without much hesitation, accepted. Then he said—

‘You wouldn’t care to come and dine at the Exhibition, I suppose? It is rather jolly there at night.’

Edith jumped at the idea.

‘Rather!’ she cried; ‘that will be a relief.’ Then she caught sight of Jack’s face, and stopped. ‘Would you like it?’ she asked, with a bewitching turn of the head.

Jack looked rather black, and said he thought it was a rough-and-tumble place to dine at. John Forbes, with creditable tact, suggested as a compromise that they should go after dinner, and on this they agreed.

The scheme was carried out; they went to the Exhibition. The gardens were illuminated; there was an excellent band; it was a fine evening. The combination

was in favour of mirth and good humour, but Jack loathed it with all his soul. During dinner Edith had done and said half-a-dozen things that annoyed him. When they had arrived at the gardens she had displayed childish glee.

‘Isn’t it lovely!’ she exclaimed. ‘It’s the most beautiful thing I ever saw. Jack, why haven’t we been here before? We’ll come every evening, won’t we, instead of sitting at home.’

She addressed all her ecstasies to him, and he might have been tolerably happy if they had been alone and he could have talked to her. But John Forbes was there. He was out of place, his presence was altogether irregular; but Edith had chosen to ask him, and it was impossible to get him out of the way now.

They visited several sheds where they saw things interesting and the reverse,

varying from trophies of England's history down to a stall for silhouette cutting. Edith was delighted with this last.

‘I must have one of Jack,’ she cried. ‘A nice black face, to keep me in mind of what he looks like in a rage. I’ll be done, too, because I’ve got such good features. No, by the way, I haven’t got good features: I won’t be done. It doesn’t matter about you, Mr. Forbes; you’ve no one to give it to.’

She was much taken also with a rifle-gallery. She fired a large number of shots, and reported that she had bagged a lion, two owls, and thirteen glass balls. Then—how it happened Jack did not know—they lost each other in the crowd. That is to say, Jack found himself alone. He felt nervous and unhappy, and he went to and fro in vain search, muttering maledictions on all things and people pre-

sent. He pulled up opposite a switchback-railway, and watched in angry contempt the noisy people rushing up and down. It seemed a senseless, disagreeable manner of locomotion, and the shrieks of the cheerful young ladies on board particularly displeased him. Imagine, then, his rage at beholding John Forbes and Edith Palliser seated together on an approaching car, the noisiest of a noisy party. There was something to his mind so abandoned, so wantonly rowdy in her conduct under the circumstances, that Jack actually stamped with indignation. He did a bold thing: he went home and left his affianced bride alone with John Forbes.

That night was spent in troubled vigil. Truth to tell, Jack was playing a desperate part: he was trying to act to himself. When a man finds he has made a mistake, he has one of two things to do: make

the best of a bad situation, or boldly set himself free. Jack had chosen the former course.

His case was not wonderful; not even original. He had emerged from seclusion fresh upon the world; a clever woman had easily captured an exposed position which he, the defender, had deemed impregnable. Of course it is distressing to relate so unheroic a surrender, but there is nothing unnatural about it. It is as rash to predict that a man is incapable of a worthless love affair as to swear to his immunity from slipping on orange peel in the street. There is a tendency now-a-days to find interest in a microscopic study of the commonplace man, and get our romance from the newspapers. Consequently it is unfashionable to relate the history of Jack Balstoun. But here it is. He had fallen in love in the ordinary violent unreflect-

ing manner: he had only good looks to plead as an excuse: certainly not other personal charms such as he had always professed to admire. But one does not reason about those things: he had answered the poet's appeal, 'love me still yet know not why.'

He probably did not know why; he had made no effort to discover. Indeed, he had resolved to have done with it on the very morning when a chance meeting had rushed matters to a crisis. Then, after the eleventh hour was past and gone, came repentance; Mrs. Dasent had come back from abroad. The first sight of her, the sound of her voice had brought him to his senses. His eyes were opened and he began to see Miss Palliser's faults. He knew at once that he had felt a fleeting passion very human and ordinary; that all his capacity for devotion still tended

in another direction. But he had done it: after professing indifference to all charms, he had been infatuated; and he was not going now to admit himself misled. His word was pledged to the lady; he had declared war with his father: he felt that his honour was engaged all round. He would bind himself to his bargain and ignore misgivings.

An additional trouble beset him in the attitude adopted by Uncle Arthur. When Jack first spoke to him, it was on the Sunday morning following his own return from Balstoun. Jack was as a rule a regular church-goer, but to-day his mind was too restless to permit of any quiet occupation. Arthur very seldom missed church on Sunday morning, but to-day he sat on after breakfast immersed in the *Spectator*. Like everything else, he took his reading seriously. He read a

long time in silence, then put down the paper with a sigh.

‘What a nuisance!’ he said.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Jack.

‘This is such a good number,’ said Arthur grievously.

‘That’s nothing to complain of, is it?’

‘Don’t you see, when it’s a good number one must read it all, and it does take up so much time: I don’t know how I shall get this done.’

‘I should leave it alone,’ suggested Jack.

‘Oh, no, it’s such a good paper,’ said Arthur, mournfully.

‘Do you mind having a talk to me instead?’ began Jack. ‘I want you to say what you think of my affairs.’

An astute man would have adopted the cynical tone; a candid friend would have been brutally sincere. Arthur was neither

of these ; he spoke in unreflecting simplicity, full of affection.

‘ Why, Jack, I own I was surprised. I am uncommonly glad you have got over your trouble about Mrs. Dasent, because nothing could come of it : but I didn’t expect you would get engaged to anyone else so soon. I don’t know Miss Palliser well. I expect what people say about her isn’t half true : she’s probably a real good sort, and I hope you’ll be awfully happy with her, old boy.’

This was damning with faint praise. Moreover, it was rubbing the sore place which Mrs. Dasent’s return had opened : of course he had no claim now to be interested in her affairs, but it was peculiarly distasteful to hear the truth so plainly stated.

He had hoped that somehow Arthur

would have given him a chance of assuming the *rôle* of martyr, instead of which he met with disgusting optimism. It was no good posing as a cynic with him.

‘I suppose you won’t have time to go and see Mrs. Dasent,’ Arthur went on. ‘I’ll tell her about you if you like : I shall be going up there.’

‘I’ve told her myself,’ said Jack.

He was leaning on the mantel-piece smoking his pipe into the empty grate.

Arthur regarded his back (which was all he could see) with astonishment.

‘The deuce you did ! When ?’

‘I went and saw her the day after you told me she was back : the day I went home,’ answered Jack.

‘I am glad of that,’ exclaimed Sir Arthur. ‘I was afraid she might feel it, your getting engaged ; it was uncommonly

nice of you going to see her just to show you are still friends. She's not seen Miss Palliser yet, I suppose?'

'No,' said Jack, sharply.

'I should take her there,' said Arthur, with conviction: 'I think she'd like it.'

He went on gaily, under the delusion that things were turning out much better than he had expected; that there would not be so many wounded feelings to attend to after all; when he was wounding Jack's feelings with every word he uttered. Jack found he had put his head into a hornet's nest and was getting badly stung: he changed the subject.

'I didn't mean to talk to you about my affairs,' he said. 'I meant my father. You said last night you thought you could stop him: can you?'

He watched his uncle, who nervously folded up the end of his cigar.

‘If I tell you, Jack,’ he said, presently, ‘it must be a sacred confidence between you and me.’

‘Of course,’ said Jack, and waited.

‘I ought not to be surprised that your father should want to marry her,’ said Arthur, ‘because I wanted to marry her myself.’

Jack repaid his uncle for any pain unintentionally inflicted just now by exclaiming, with equal naïveté,

‘Well, I’m——’ in such a tone as to admit of only one interpretation.

‘I met her in the Colonies, as you know,’ went on Arthur. ‘I found her charming, accomplished, all the rest of it. Coming home I proposed to her: she said she couldn’t accept me because she was already pledged. I got her the berth at Balstoun, and all this time she has been playing fast and loose with me. I sus-

pected nothing for a long time ; but I had misgivings when Mrs. Dasent's trouble began. Miss Mirabel got an idea that your father wanted to marry Mrs. Dasent himself, and she was too obviously anxious to get rid of the lady—never mind how she set about it, nor how I know. It occurred to me then that she was keeping me at arm's length in the hope of flying at higher game. I've not a word to say against her character, but I do believe now she's a tricky devil who can't be trusted, and certainly ought not to be John's wife. If I persuade him he's being snared he will revolt at once.'

Jack knew his father better than Arthur did.

'You'll never persuade him of that,' he said. 'Prove to him that she is disreputable, and you may do some good. Have you ever spoken to him?'

‘I wrote to him before I went abroad last time,’ answered Arthur.

‘What did you say?’

‘I told him I had wanted to marry her myself; that I thought now she was a bad lot, and begged him to inquire about her if she was going to stay on in the house.’

‘What did he say to that?’ asked Jack.

‘Nothing,’ said Arthur, crestfallen.

‘It appears to me,’ said the nephew, ‘that you’ve already fired your shot without effect. You’ve told father that the lady wouldn’t marry you, and that you believe she is a fraud; but he doesn’t seem to mind. What more can you do?’

Arthur fidgetted about: he had been debating lately whether an emergency had arisen which would absolve him from secrecy as regards that intercepted telegram. It was a crisis, and he was at the height of indignation.

‘I have a great mind,’ he said, suddenly, ‘to go down to Balstoun and put it to him straight.’

‘Do you think you can do any good?’

‘I may. I don’t care for the job; but it isn’t a time for funkings,’ said Arthur, stoutly.

It suddenly occurred to Jack that he would like to get rid of his uncle. He had hoped to get a certain amount of consolation out of him, but the few minutes’ conversation they had had, proved that the contrary effect was imminent.

‘Do, Arthur,’ he exclaimed. ‘Go home and have a last try. It will be the best day’s work you ever did if you succeed; besides, you will be company for Agatha: she wants some one badly.’

Arthur went accordingly, leaving Jack alone amidst the joys of his affianced state. It followed, therefore, that he found himself

without a companion at breakfast on the morning after Edith's escapade on the switchback. He felt wretched. A week ago he would have felt unhappy in simple jealousy, because Edith had romped with Forbes instead of talking to him. Now he was disgusted that she should romp at all. He reflected with a groan how impossible such conduct would have been on Mrs. Dasent's part.

There was still a glamour about Edith : it was impossible to shake off the attraction all at once ; but love was no longer blind. In her absence and in the calm of an after-breakfast reflection, he took a tolerably matter-of-fact view of things. He indulged in comparisons, and found the advantage entirely on Mrs. Dasent's side.

A wave of desire for her came over him, and he deliberately went off to pay

her a visit. It was early, and she had not yet gone out. He had been to see her more than once since his uncle's departure. She knew now that he was unhappy: at first she had thought he was only shy.

‘It's nice of you to spare me a little time,’ she said. ‘I suppose you are on your way to see Miss Palliser?’

On former occasions she had repeated her wish to see the lady: now she refrained. It was evident Jack did not intend it.

‘Of course I come here,’ he said. ‘I may come every day, mayn't I?’

A dreadful fear came over Mrs. Dasent: there was no mistaking his tone.

‘That is rather a tax on your friendship,’ she said, laughing. ‘You will be too busy to do that, I expect.’

Jack leaned forward in his chair with his teeth on the top of his stick, staring

out of the window. He was sorely tempted. Like a vision of heaven appeared a possible freedom from his bonds ; freedom to leave Edith and spend his days at Mrs. Dasent's feet. He felt he could patiently abide there until she were free to become his wife : that was his only chance of happiness on earth. One struggle with a sense of shame, a little courage, or rather a great deal of courage to face the abuse of the world, and he would be free ; restored as a man that wakes from a nightmare. The temptation took the particular form of declaring that the marriage was impossible in view of his father's refusal to consent. The parental shoulders are not unfrequently burdened on occasions of this sort : they are found useful, but it is not a very glorious resource. Two important obstacles, however, confronted Jack. In the first place, he had begun by

setting his father's authority at nought ; and furthermore, the Palliser family had consented to do without it. Nothing remained for Jack but barefaced desertion. There was not much outlet in the direction of honest indignation. If he pleaded Edith's conduct as his excuse, he would be laughed at for discovering the truth so late.

‘ I wonder whether being in love matters when you are to be married,’ he said, presently.

Mrs. Dasent had to decide quickly. In an ordinary way she would have warned any of her friends against marriage without affection : it seemed to her horrible. She would even have advised breaking an engagement at the eleventh hour : but this case was peculiar. She was satisfied that Jack did not assume this air for the purpose of exonerating himself in her eyes ;

she saw that he was unsettled, and she greatly feared he was veering back towards herself. In her judgment it would have been the act of friendship to beg him hesitate if he were in doubt, but she determined at once that she would subject herself to no imputation, whether from within or without, of having been the means of upsetting his prospects. Not yet, at all events. If upon further information it transpired that Miss Palliser was really a person whom Jack ought not to marry, she might, at any cost, be inclined to dissuade him. At present the consciousness of her own bias, and the abhorrence of risking a suspicion of jealousy, drove her into a course distasteful to her own feelings.

‘That’s a common question,’ she answered. ‘When men are engaged, they get dreadfully introspective. You should not worry your head about it: be happy

while you are engaged, and make up your mind it shall continue. It is foolish to start with questionings.'

'Edith is very unlike you,' said Jack.

'Is that a compliment, I wonder,' she answered.

Jack did not attend to this.

'She is very pretty,' he said.

Mrs. Dasent perhaps realized that the poor man was trying hard to convince himself; she laughed at him.

'That's unkind, after saying she was unlike me.'

Jack smiled languidly,

'Of course, I mean she doesn't talk like you: though she is serious sometimes. She puzzles me: she is about six women rolled into one.'

'Then she will be six times as good a wife to you as anyone else could be.'

Jack shook his head.

‘It will make a variety anyhow, if we are alone at Palliser,’ he said. ‘I am sure I hope she will be satisfied without a sixfold sort of husband. Do you know what she did last night?’ he went on, after a pause. ‘John Forbes dined in Brook Street and came on with us to the Exhibition. Somehow I missed them in the crowd, and I next saw them together on a switchback railway making a fearful noise.’

There was something bordering on the ridiculous in the gravity with which he described this unromantic scene.

‘My dear friend, that shows what a state of fidgets you are in,’ she answered. ‘Wasn’t that better than finding them in a dark corner suspiciously silent.’

‘But why should she want Forbes to

be there at all ?' he demanded. ' It isn't usual for engaged people to require a third person, is it ?'

' She didn't leave you at home,' said Mrs. Dasent. ' It was an accident your missing them in the crowd. There are some people to whom that sort of thing would be only a natural outlet for good spirits. I don't know Miss Palliser ; but I expect she is one of them. Don't make yourself unhappy about that ; trust to it you are going to have a wife who is always in high spirits.'

' That is too much of the switchback-railway ; too much of a rush ; always right up or right down,' said Jack.

Mrs. Dasent, living entirely without an audience, had no vain desire to keep her lover at heel, and could admit to a sense of relief in knowing that he had found consolation. It matters little that you are

neglected if there is no one by to pity you. On the other hand, she was conscious of a wicked satisfaction at hearing Jack discussing his fiancée. Much as she wished him happiness, it was pleasant to remember that in the old days no such criticisms had distempered her short idyl. An idyl it must remain, however; not a poetic preface to a tragic tale; and she felt that his visits had better be discontinued. The less she saw of him the better for all parties concerned. She thought she would leave London at once.

Before he left, Jack reverted to her affairs. 'No news?' he asked.

'None,' she replied, quietly. 'It is pretty clear he is not trying the London stage.'

'Where shall you look next?' asked Jack.

'I am making enquiries in the big

towns: I shall go on. There is nothing else for me to do.'

Jack remarked the weariness of spirit in her words, and his heart went out to her.

'Can't I do anything to help you?' he said.

'I am not going to bring my tiresome affairs into your life just now,' she answered, smiling. 'Your uncle is so good to me. I know I can go to him if I want help at any time.'

Jack bowed his head and left her. He had no right to interfere; Arthur was preferred before him.

It was nearly lunch-time when he reached Brook Street. A servant was holding a saddle-horse before Colonel Palliser's door.

'Whose horse is that?' he asked.

'Mr. Forbes's, sir.'

He was tempted to ask how long Forbes

had been there, but he refrained. It was like spying; it suggested jealousy, and he disliked discovering this to himself as much as to the servant.

He rang the bell, and was shown, according to custom, into Edith's room. It was small and overlooked an uninteresting bit of back regions; but it was more cheerful, all the same, than most of its counterparts in the street. It contained a piano, an oriental divan, and a pier-glass. Edith's versatile nature was exemplified in her surroundings: Scott's novels and Brown-ing; François Coppet and 'La Folie' (which, as everybody knows, is the lightest of light journals); 'Roderick Random' and Burton's 'Anatomy of Melancholy,' made an odd combination on her table. Paint-boxes, scraps of embroidery, cigarettes, letters lay about everywhere, giving the room a Bohemian air which was counteracted by a careful and

profuse arrangement of flowers. Beauty, luxury, amusement were all in request, it seemed.

Edith was lying back in a deep chair, smoking a cigarette, her straw hat in the lap of her riding-habit: John Forbes stood in front of her on the hearth-rug. They were both laughing when the door opened, but stopped at once when they saw Jack.

‘Come in, Jack,’ cried Edith, unabashed, whilst Forbes stood shy and silent. ‘I thought I should find you here as you weren’t riding. I waited for you ever so long; then Mr. Forbes brought me home. He came in for a minute to teach me a tune on the banjo, but he won’t wait for lunch; he wants to be off again directly.’

Forbes was clearly uncomfortable whilst she chattered. Colonel Palliser came in.

‘Good-morning, Balstoun,’ he said. ‘I thought I heard you come in an hour ago

with Edith. Oh, it was you, I suppose?' he added, turning to Forbes.

'So they must have been here an hour,' reflected Jack, turning away to put down his hat. 'She might have waited till we were married to begin that game.'

He folded up his gloves slowly, and watched her without the orthodox feelings of a lover. He suddenly remembered how she had once avowed her love of acting. She had shown the spark then over an idea; she was giving him a taste of her quality now in an unheroic situation.

'I want your pony-cart this afternoon,' said Colonel Palliser, standing in the middle of the room.

He was a good-looking man: wore old-fashioned whiskers, and was never without spats and a red necktie.

'You can't have it,' answered Edith at once. 'Jack and I want it.'

‘Where are you going?’ asked the father.

‘For a drive,’ she replied, evasively.

‘What an infernally selfish girl you are,’ grumbled the Colonel.

‘It’s my cart,’ said Edith.

‘It will cost me more than a pound,’ said Colonel Palliser, referring presumably to alternative cab-hire. ‘I hate going by train.’

‘Where do you want to go?’ asked Edith.

‘The Riverside Club.’

‘We are going there,’ said Edith.

‘Why didn’t you say so?’ said the Colonel.

‘You didn’t ask me. Besides, it makes no difference: there wouldn’t be room for you in the cart.’

‘Am I going?’ asked Jack.

‘Of course you are,’ said Edith. ‘We

arranged it this morning : I mean I said I would ask you. You would like to go, wouldn't you ?'

' I wondered where we were going for a drive,' said Jack, blandly.

' It's all right : there will be plenty to see there to-day, and lots of people. Father can go by train very well.'

John Forbes, who seemed to wish himself anywhere else, proposed that Colonel Palliser should go with him on Major Cruttle's coach : he knew there would be room. Edith had been disposed to go on the coach herself, but she had decided that the line must be drawn somewhere—presumably at Major Cruttle.

It was settled in this way ; but, like many other plans that are settled, they also were overthrown. During lunch a note was brought by Jack's servant.

Arthur was in London, and enjoined his nephew to return to Balstoun with him that day 'without fail.'

CHAPTER VI.

ARTHUR BALSTOUN COMES TO THE FRONT.

ARTHUR BALSTOUN has hitherto played an insignificant part in our drama; he has had nothing much to do with its development, and none of the fun belonging respectively to the *rôles* of leading young man, villain, and character old man. He has not even been the old-fashioned 'wicked uncle'; only a sort of 'walking gentleman' or general utility. Now it is his turn to speed the action.

It has been faithfully recorded how he had resolved to go north and combat his

brother's marriage project ; and how Jack, not caring for too cheerful a companion in his present nervous state, had encouraged him to go, thinking less of his uncle's chances of success than his own relief from inopportune companionship.

The summer was so far advanced that London was emptying apace : those who had no affairs on hand except day to day amusement were away afield and afloat. Arthur travelled down to the north with some Balstoun neighbours, who began pressing him about Jack's engagement.

‘ We were so much surprised,’ said the matron of the party. ‘ He seemed such a quiet and steady boy always, and he had seen so little of the world. We looked upon him as something of a recluse. Miss Palliser was the last person we should have expected him to marry.’

‘ I don't see why,’ said paterfamilias,

with a husband's bluntness. 'She's just the woman to catch a chap who's extra green. I'm devilish glad it wasn't my boy.'

'George, you mustn't say that to Captain Balstoun.'

The gentleman so rebuked looked conscious of having blundered, and began fumbling amongst his newspapers.

'Oh, of course it's all right, but I don't suppose John's overpleased: is he, Arthur? By-the-by,' he added, dropping his *Standard*, 'there's a story going round that he means getting married himself. One or two fellows told me: there's nothing in it, I suppose?'

'Sir John going to be married!' exclaimed mother and daughters together. 'George, you never told me that,' added the mother.

'Didn't I? I meant to.'

Arthur twisted his great moustache about and blushed.

‘I haven’t seen him for some time,’ he said. ‘I’ll write and let you know.’

Confession was evident on his face. But the daughters pressed him.

‘If it were true, you would be sure to know,’ said one.

‘I believe you do know and won’t say,’ declared the other, less ingenuous. ‘Do tell us; we won’t repeat it. Who is it?’

Arthur battled it out successfully, thanks to the mother, who changed the subject, and made a resolve to get at Arthur privately when the train stopped for any time. He proved too cunning for her, however, and took the earliest opportunity of retreating to a smoking-compartment.

The first thing that greeted him on arrival at Balstoun was a Chinese pug-dog, who rose from the hearthrug and

barked asthmatically for several minutes. Dinner was over long ago, and he had to wait whilst some supper was got ready for him. It was not a pleasant situation: Agatha had gone to bed before dinner; and he was alone with the enemy. Sir John had not the air of a man to be lightly thwarted in his purpose; Miss Mirabel exhibited provoking consciousness of victory. The pug croaked round Arthur's legs, scratching and pawing at them.

‘What is this?’ he asked, for something to say.

‘It is mine,’ said Miss Mirabel.

‘I wondered how John came by such a dog,’ he went on. ‘It’s a new departure.’

‘You don’t seem to know much about it,’ observed Miss Mirabel. ‘It is a very valuable dog.’

‘It seems fond of varnish,’ said Arthur,

‘it’s licking my boots;’ and he pushed it away with his foot.

‘Don’t do that,’ she exclaimed, angrily. ‘It isn’t doing any harm. Come here, Wizzy;’ and to Arthur’s relief she caught it up and lavished a quantity of adulation upon its unconscious head.

They were sitting in a small room to which Miss Mirabel had taken a fancy. It had an oak ceiling and a splendid oak fire-place. This was flanked by massive fluted columns, supporting a kind of pent-house, black with the smoke of many wood fires. Deep leather sofas stood at right angles on either side, and facing the hearth stood a wooden stool now occupied by Arthur. The tone of the room was green : green curtains, green leather sofas, green drugget. There were no ornaments but blue china : two huge vases in opposite corners, and one set of shelves filled

with beautiful porcelain along one of the walls.

Here this trio sat and waited for the announcement of food to ease the strain. Arthur responded with alacrity when it came, and fortified himself with a solid meal. On his return he was pleasantly surprised to find that Miss Mirabel had retired, taking her precious dog with her. He was glad in a desperate sort of way, because it enabled him to approach his terrible task. He had possessed himself of the daring that comes to him that has well eaten and well drunk: he knew his effort had better be made now than to-morrow morning after a poor meal of coffee and bacon.

‘Do you allow smoking here?’ he asked, pulling out a cigar-case.

Sir John hesitated.

‘Miss Mirabel has taken a fancy to the

room,' he said. 'Perhaps we had better go downstairs.'

Arthur put back his case: he did not want to give his courage cooling time.

'No, no. I don't care. We can talk very well here: I don't want to disturb you.'

The Baronet sat down on one of the green leather sofas. It had a deep angle, and he leaned back luxuriously, evidently at peace with the world in general.

'Well, Arthur,' he began, 'have you come to congratulate me?'

'I got your letter,' was all Arthur could think of saying.

'I suppose you did: but I never got your answer.'

'No. I thought I would come instead.'

'That was good of you,' said the Baronet. 'Of course you thought it right some time ago to caution me against what has now

happened. Never mind; bygones are bygones: I am sure you are ready to forget the past and accept things as they are. I bear no grudge for what you said then: you bear me none for being where I am now. I am very happy: I want to have no clouds anywhere.'

It was not often that Sir John spoke as plainly as this. For a single moment Arthur considered the possibility of accepting the situation and giving the hand of friendship. But he dismissed the idea: his honour was engaged.

'I wish you happiness, John; no one more so. But I can't honestly congratulate you.' He was not looking at his brother, but he knew those keen eyes were fixed upon him. 'You have spoken of my past warning: I repeat it. It's true the lady rejected me; you may suppose I act from jealousy: I don't. I don't interfere be-

cause she threw me over; it is because of the way in which she did it, the way in which she has behaved since she has been in this house.'

'You are undertaking a serious responsibility,' said Sir John, slowly, after a pause.

'I am not afraid,' said Arthur, 'I came here to have it out.'

'Don't be in a hurry,' interposed Sir John. 'Least said, soonest mended; we had better sleep on it before we say any more to one another.'

'I would rather not sleep till I have had my say,' protested Arthur.

'I do not care to have anyone sleeping under my roof who has said too much;' and Sir John rose from the sofa. 'Besides,' he went on, 'I understand you are going to bring in question Miss Mirabel's

conduct during her residence in my house. I should like her to be present and hear the charges.'

Arthur grew alarmed.

'Surely it is not wrong for me to speak plainly as brother to brother in such a case as this.'

'By no means. I must know now all you have to say; but, as it principally refers to a third person, it is necessary for her to be present, so that we may get at the truth.'

'But I must have a word or two with you first, John.'

'Certainly, if it is irrespective of her. On the subject of our marriage I would rather hear no more to-night; to-morrow morning we will try and understand each other.'

He evidently meant to show that his

brother was dismissed from favour for the time being. He gave him a candlestick and wished him good-night.

When Arthur came down next morning, he found Miss Mirabel sitting at the dining-room window reading her letters: the Chinese pug was wheezing in her lap. The gallant Captain was not pleased at this encounter: he had hoped to find Agatha.

‘You are an early riser,’ he said, with a poor attempt at ease.

She looked up at him with no friendly eye. ‘I came down early because I knew I should find you,’ she said, frankly. ‘You have come here to meddle. I warn you, if we fight it will be with the gloves off: you know I can take care of myself.’

Arthur regarded her beautiful face with a kind of terror. He had once been so

entirely under its spell; it represented now his ideal of treachery and hardness of heart.

‘I hope,’ he said, with unexpected assurance, ‘that it was not painful work breaking that other pledge of which you once told me.’

Miss Mirabel flushed at once.

‘That’s my affair,’ she replied. ‘What concerns you is that, if you mean to try and set your brother against me, you will find story-telling is a game for two.’

‘I don’t mean to tell stories. He knows I was once anxious to marry you; he attributes my present conduct to jealousy. I admit I am not in favour of his marriage with you: that is candid, isn’t it?’

‘In a way, yes. But I knew that already. What I should like to know is, how you propose to stop it?’

‘I can answer that with another question.

Do you wish me to tell him all I know?’

She eyed him for a moment with contempt.

‘Why not?’ she asked. ‘I don’t think you can find much to say against me.’

‘There is the matter of that telegram,’ said Arthur. ‘I never quite got over that: it might make an impression on him.’

Miss Mirabel had apparently forgotten this altogether; she was evidently scared.

‘You promised me you would not tell him,’ she said, quickly.

‘You seem uneasy about it; you don’t want him to know. I have been thinking that it may be excusable to break a promise in such a case as this,’ said Arthur.

‘You dare!’ she exclaimed, between her teeth. ‘You break your word of honour given to a woman, if you dare!’

Arthur moved restlessly.

‘I don’t want to,’ he said, ‘but I’d do it for my brother’s sake.’

She looked at his open face and great blue eyes, and realised that, strong as his integrity might be, he would wrench his own feelings to serve his brother. It was alarming; and she did not quite know how to deal with him. Blandishments were evidently out of place. She gave a short laugh.

‘Very well. Tell him: I don’t care.’

‘Yes, you do,’ said Arthur. ‘You are afraid of his knowing.’

‘Not I. I daresay my version of the story will be as convincing as yours.’

It dawned on Arthur’s mind that she would save herself with lies at his expense: it was a new light on her power of mischief, and the situation appeared more desperate than ever.

‘I came here, as you may suppose, to try

and dissuade my brother, but only by fair means,' he said.

'You have only one tale to tell against me,' she replied, 'and you can't tell that because your sense of honour will prevent you; so I'm not afraid. You won't do me any harm, but don't imagine I shall forget it.'

Sir John came in, and she was immediately smiling. Arthur looked at her and groaned in spirit.

'How is Agatha this morning?' asked Sir John.

Miss Mirabel had to confess she had not asked. Breakfast was brought in, and Sir John was sending up a message of enquiry when the young lady presented herself. She looked ill, but brightened up at sight of her uncle: his appearance was like an encouraging message brought into a beleaguered city—help from without.

Sir John sipped his tea and told Arthur it was the best he had ever tasted ; it came from the stores and Miss Mirabel had discovered it. Arthur drank coffee. It was not usual to find cream on the Balstoun breakfast-table : to-day he found a jug full at his elbow, and poured most of it into his cup. Miss Mirabel screamed.

‘ Captain Balstoun, what are you doing ? That isn’t for you, it’s for Wizzy. How tiresome of you ! Ring the bell, please. There may not be any more in the house.’

Arthur looked at the goggle-eyed beast, who seemed to be vaguely conscious that something was going wrong. He could not honestly say he was sorry.

‘ I didn’t know it was meant for the dog,’ he said.

Miss Mirabel was personally affronted, and forgot to conceal her ill-humour. Happily it appeared that there was plenty

of cream in the house, or a terrible scene might have ensued. Sir John might even have had his first misgiving as to her sweetness of temper, and out of that good might have come.

Agatha was silent. It all seemed very painful to her: at every hour of the day something was happening to wound her susceptibilities. Home, the old centre of her happy life, was like to be home for her no longer, save in name alone.

Sir John made no allusion to his skirmish with his brother over-night. He said he supposed Arthur would find some means of amusing himself, and left it for the latter to re-open hostilities if he chose. Miss Mirabel went off, leaving uncle and niece together.

‘Well,’ said Arthur, bluntly, ‘what’s to be done?’

Agatha shook her head.

‘Nothing. She is going to be my step-mother, and there’s an end of it.’

‘It’s confoundedly hard on you, dear,’ said Arthur, kindly.

‘It doesn’t matter so long as no one else is put out,’ she said, simply. ‘Only I hope it won’t break up the home altogether. She will try to have everything her own way.’

‘Your father won’t let her,’ said Arthur.

‘I don’t know. I am surprised to see how weak he is with her. That dog is a small instance. You know he would never let Jack or me have a dog in the house : now the whole establishment is to be put out for Wizzy. Once she actually made father give it its dinner. She certainly has a wonderful influence over him.’

‘How do you get on with her now?’

‘I try to be friends. In old days, when she was my governess, we got on very

well. I wanted to be nice, and make her feel that we were fond of her. She was very good to me, and I thought she was more or less grateful. Now that the tables are turned she is only civil to me before father, and does her best to make me feel I am in the way.'

'What a brute!' exclaimed Arthur.

'I would have tried to forgive her taking mother's place if she had been nice. She might have behaved so differently, and made it possible. As it is, I can't help feeling indignant.'

'Cheer up,' said Arthur. 'A game is never lost till it is won: we will stop him marrying her yet.'

Agatha shook her head doubtfully.

'I don't know. There is really no reason why he shouldn't. You and I may not like it, but there is nothing else against Miss Mirabel. If one could only be sure that

she would give father no reason to repent, perhaps we ought to be glad.'

Again Arthur was tempted to break secrecy about Miss Mirabel.

'You are very forgiving, Agatha,' was all he said.

'As it is,' she went on, unheeding, 'he is worrying himself all the time about Jack. How is Jack? Is he determined to marry Miss Palliser?'

'Oh, yes,' said Arthur. 'He is very much in love.'

'Do you believe that?' she asked. 'Isn't it only a fancy? Do you think he can care for her seriously, after being really in love with Mrs. Dasent a year ago?'

'I don't know,' said Arthur, puzzled. 'I took his word for it.'

'I don't believe it will last,' said Agatha.

'I never thought of that,' Arthur answered.

Agatha rose and went towards the window.

‘Come and sit in the garden,’ she said.
‘We have got so much to talk about.’

‘I am going to get a hat and a pipe,’ said Arthur, moving to the door.

He met the butler in the hall, who gave him a note.

‘This has just been sent from Waterdale by hand, sir,’ he said, eyeing it suspiciously. ‘A lad brought it over, and said it was to be forwarded to you at once.’

Arthur took the envelope. It was addressed in a rambling hand, more suggestive of infirmity than illiteracy. He stood there reading the contents a moment, then hurried after Agatha, leaving the butler in a provoking state of curiosity.

Agatha was lying in a deck-chair under a cedar-tree. She was listless and inert,

and hardly moved at Arthur's approach. She did not observe, therefore, that he was greatly excited. He had news on the tip of his tongue, and could not waste time in breaking it softly.

'Here's a queer thing happened,' he exclaimed. 'He's turned up and wants to see me.'

'Who?' asked Agatha, looking up.

'Mrs. Dasent's husband.'

Agatha was fully alive now.

'Where did she find him?'

'She didn't. I've found him for her.'

'Where was he?' she inquired, as if she expected to be told he had been discovered behind the pantry door.

'He has written to say he is ill in Waterdale hospital.'

She repeated the statement in a tone of incredulity.

'Why does he write to you? Give me

the letter;' and she put out her hand impatiently.

'I hear there is going to be a marriage in your family, and I must see you at once,' ran the note. 'I am very ill, so do not delay coming. I would rather see you than Sir John.' It was signed Herbert Dasent.

'Uncle Arthur, what is going to happen? He must have known of Jack's engagement to his wife, and now he is sorry Jack is going to marry some one else. I suppose he is dying, and wants to feel his widow will be taken care of.'

'He hasn't troubled himself about her hitherto,' said Arthur.

'We don't know his story yet. Go and see him at once. Uncle Arthur, do you think I might go too?'

'I think you had better not, dear. Let me find out about him first. I wonder

how he came here, and why he should fix on me? I suppose he found out who I was when we were all in Melbourne.'

'He must have come to see his wife before he dies. I wonder what's the matter with him? I should rather like to see him,' said Agatha.

'It is a pity she went after him as it turns out. They have been playing hide-and-seek,' said Arthur, pulling out his watch. 'I will drive over at once. Or will you drive me over: if you don't mind waiting while I am in the hospital?'

'I will, if Miss Mirabel hasn't ordered the ponies,' said Agatha. 'She does that now.'

This morning, however, she had not, and it was agreed that Agatha should drive her uncle. He elected to say nothing to Sir John. They were not on terms of confidence just now, and Arthur thought he would leave his brother severe-

ly alone for the present: he could manage this affair by himself in its present stage.

Waterdale Hospital stands on the near side of the town, and a fine building it is. It is of red-brick, with many windows. In front is a fire-escape and a garden; but principally a fire-escape. It is very large and conspicuous, whereas the garden is but meagre; but then land is dear in Waterdale. Agatha left her uncle at the gate, and went off to spin out time in shopping. Arthur went up to the great door and rang a ponderous bell. A grave official in blue answered his summons, and wondered why so healthy a man should come to a hospital.

‘I want to see one of your patients,’ said Arthur. ‘A man named Dasent.’

‘I don’t know as you can, sir,’ answered the porter.

‘I must,’ said Arthur. ‘It’s most important.’

‘I don’t know as they’ll let you,’ muttered the porter. ‘Come this way, please.’

He led the way to a waiting-room, where Arthur was left alone for several minutes. He was immensely excited, and kept on vowing determination to have his interview, in spite of the whole governing body.

Suddenly the door opened, and a brisk man of fifty or thereabouts, with grey beard and a frock coat, bustled into the room. He carried the card which Arthur had sent in.

‘Sorry to keep you waiting, Captain Balstoun,’ said the doctor. ‘I understand you wish to see Dasent.’

‘I am very anxious to see him,’ said Arthur.

‘May I ask if you know him?’

‘I know of him. I have been wanting

to find him for some time: I only saw him once long ago.'

'He is dying,' said the doctor, with startling directness.

'He said in his letter he was very ill. What is it?' asked Arthur.

'Consumption. Has he been writing to you?'

'I got this note this morning.'

'To be sure. He asked to have a letter sent: I didn't know whom it was for.'

'He asks me to come and see him. I hope I may,' said Arthur, anxiously.

'There is no reason why you shouldn't; but he can't bear fatigue, and you mustn't let him get excited. I should be glad, however, if you could tell me a little about him. He is a mysterious creature: he interests me.'

'I really know very little,' said Arthur.
'I am expecting to find out now. All I

can tell you is, that he left his wife, who is a friend of mine, and she has never been able to find him. He was once an actor in the Colonies. What he has done since I can't say.'

'We had him here in the winter,' said the doctor. 'He was in a bad way altogether. He had got hurt in a carriage accident, and not having any constitution to fall back upon, he was worse than he need have been. He went out in the spring, but he had to come back. He has gone to pieces very quickly.'

Arthur was anxious to learn about Dasent, but still more desirous of seeing him. He discouraged a continuation of these remarks, which were rather in the nature of a reverie, and begged to be allowed to see the invalid forthwith.

With intense curiosity he approached the bedside. Here was the man who had

cut into his nephew's life ; whom he himself had gone to the world's end to look for. Apart from these personal interests, he was accountable for the strange treatment of his wife. No interviewer ever approached his hero or victim with greater keenness and curiosity. He saw a man whose face was quite strange to him. He did not in the least recognize the individual he had one day met when walking with Miss Mirabel in the streets of Melbourne. He remembered a sufficiently hale being, with rather a rakish air : he beheld a face, bearded, and emaciated by disease and fever, with large eyes that glared up from the pillow. The fingers were so wasted as to seem abnormally long : he was clearly far gone in decline. Arthur's guide brought him to the bedside, and considerately left them together.

What passed at this interview has to be

recorded in the next chapter. Suffice it here to say, that Agatha was kept waiting for some time at the hospital gate. When Arthur came out he was visibly moved: she hardly dared ask him what had happened. No sooner, however, were they on their way home than he related his story to her, and effectually dispelled all traces of listlessness in her manner. She shared his excitement to the full, and could ill endure his injunction to remain silent and inactive whilst he launched out into bold diplomatic enterprises. He knew exactly what to do: he was full of initiative and determination, and she must abide in patience whilst he took action. By the late express he left for London. He went off from the station to transact a particular commission: that is why he did not come upon Jack till lunch-time.

CHAPTER VII.

RELATES AN INTERESTING ENCOUNTER.

WHEN Jack reached the station he was not a little astonished to find not only his uncle waiting, but Mrs. Dasent with him. She was dressed very simply in blue, and she wore a thick veil, unsuited to such a warm day, but well adapted to baffling observation. He shook hands with her as if the meeting was the least unexpected thing in the world, and gave his uncle an inquiring glance.

‘I’ve got a carriage reserved,’ was Arthur’s only reply.

Jack asked Mrs. Dasent what papers she would like, and, when she said she did not want any, he illogically proceeded to buy nearly all he could see. As Arthur had done this five minutes earlier, they found themselves well provisioned with journalism as they steamed out of the station in a locked compartment.

But they cared little for the newspapers : Arthur's information was engrossing as he unfolded to them the story already made known to Agatha.

Contrary to custom, they went through to Waterdale station and took rooms at the inn. Next morning Arthur conducted Mrs. Dasent to her husband's bedside. It was a situation far more interesting, as well as more dramatic, than any yet described in these pages, but delicacy forbids us to intrude at such a moment. And, what is more to the point, to report on it

would be to discount the possible interest of what is to follow.

Lunch was over at Balstoun. Sir John was eating an extra piece of cake for something to do. Miss Mirabel was feeding Wizzy on cream, and Agatha was looking at her ancestors on the wall, vaguely wondering what a subsequent generation would be likely to think of 'Alice, second wife of Sir John, twenty-third Baronet.' She supposed it would look all right when the time came: very likely there had been just the same troubles connected with some of the ladies now smiling out of their gold frames. She rose from the small, round table, and went across the waste of polished oak to the oriel window. She sat on the arm of a high chair for a minute, then went back to the table. Her new mood had been apparent all day; ever

since Arthur had left so suddenly, in fact. Both Sir John and Miss Mirabel were aware of the change; neither of them had spoken of it yet.

‘You are glad to have your brother home,’ said the Baronet now.

‘Of course I am,’ said Agatha, though she seemed shy of the subject.

‘And you made Arthur go and fetch him?’

‘Oh, no,’ said Agatha, at once.

She saw a shadow pass over her father’s face. It had been his hope: it was the only alternative to the idea that Arthur had decided on bringing Jack to back him up in the family wrangle.

‘Then I can’t imagine why he rushed off like that to get him. He is as mad as a March hare.’

Miss Mirabel was satisfied that Arthur had only the second object in view. She was hardening herself for the final bout,

and had not anything to say at present.

‘When will they be here?’ she asked of Agatha. ‘Captain Balstoun comes and goes without any warning. This might be an hotel, judging from the way he uses it.’

‘I suppose he has always been accustomed to come and go as he chooses,’ said Agatha, her indignation rising.

Miss Mirabel was administering a final mouthful to her pet and made no answer; but the look in her eyes suggested a forthcoming change of habits when Balstoun should recognize her as its mistress.

Sir John changed the subject.

‘Tracer is to be here at three,’ he said, rising. ‘If you will come to my room then, we will go through all the papers with him.’

Miss Mirabel gave Agatha a look of triumph. This meeting had been arranged

to admit her into such knowledge of estate affairs as she was likely to require. Her barque was nearly in port now.

It was a proud moment when she went to attend this conference. A career of hard work and hard scheming, not unattended with roughness, was in a fair way to be crowned with complete success. She sat down at Sir John's table in a glow of exultation which it was difficult to repress, and waited for Mr. Tracer to begin. This grave personage bore no sign of emotion; he put on his spectacles and opened a folio volume. Sir John leaned forward, rearranging a basin of roses: he buried his nose in them for a moment, relishing their sweet fragrance. He would have been happy enough were it not for the shadow of his tiresome brother and impracticable son in the background. Mr. Tracer began.

‘ I think, madam, I had better call your

attention first to this book: it refers to the principal leases held from Sir John.'

It was the first time he had addressed her like this, and Miss Mirabel was conscious of growing condescension as she signified assent. He was about to proceed, when wheels were heard on the drive without. Sir John and Miss Mirabel looked at one another quickly, then returned to Mr. Tracer, who set about informing the lady of the extent and wealth of her new dominion. But neither of his listeners were perfectly attentive: they were aware that the enemy had returned, and both were eagerly speculating on the character of the next attack. They had not long to wait. Mr. Tracer was interrupted in the midst of his figures by a knock at the door. Sir John called out permission, and the butler entered.

'Mr. John's compliments, Sir John, and

he would be glad if he might see you.'

Sir John was ready.

'Did you tell him I was engaged?'

'Yes, Sir John. I was to say that he was sorry to disturb you, but he wished to see you at once.'

Sir John debated a moment with his hands folded on the blotting-pad before him. Then he said,

'Ask Mr. John to come here, Barndore.'

'I beg your pardon, Sir John, Mr. John is not alone.'

Miss Mirabel had been watching Sir John intently, and had seen that his decision meant bringing things to the point now, and in the most formal manner. Barndore's remark drew her gaze to himself; Sir John, too, looked up curiously.

'Who else is there? Captain Balstoun?'

'Yes, Sir John, and another gentleman.'

'Didn't Mr. John say who he was?'

‘No, Sir John.’

Then they meant mischief, these relatives of his. Sir John morally halted, and drew himself to his full height. If they chose to beard him, let them look to it: they would find it no joke.

‘Show them all in here, Barndore.’

The butler withdrew, and Mr. Tracer took off his spectacles.

‘Don’t go, please,’ said Sir John. ‘I want you to note very carefully what passes here. We will put an end to this for once and for all,’ he added to Miss Mirabel.

She favoured him with a smile of sweet resignation, as much as to imply that she was sorry to be the cause of annoyance; but if he thought her charms were worth it, of course it wasn’t for her to object. A meaning smile, in fact, rather like Burleigh’s nod.

There had been no false sentiment about disguising the hostility which the proposed alliance had provoked. It had been frankly recognized that Arthur and Jack protested : she had easily disposed of the former, on the score of jealousy : she had no fear of Sir John being overruled by the latter. Now she would confront them both, and have the satisfaction of seeing Sir John drive them right off the field. Who this third man could be she did not greatly care. She made up her mind that Arthur had brought down a London lawyer to fight for him : it was the sort of stupid commonplace thing Arthur would do.

They were slow in coming, or else her impatience was great. She felt her heart beating ; she heard some sparrows twittering in the creeper outside, and a footman dropping some knives in an obscure region. She observed Mr. Tracer's necktie, and

wondered whether he cared what he wore, and if not, how he came by such a smart one. These unimportant things wove themselves into the working of her mind fixed on graver issues. There was a footfall outside, and the door opened slowly. She prepared to receive them with a smile of fearless composure.

First, Jack entered, and on his arm leaned a man at sight of whom her heart stood still. She half rose from her chair with a cry as if some one had struck her. She put out one hand and reeled forward. Mr. Tracer thought she was fainting, and hurried to her side ; but she motioned him back. Her face was deadly pale, and she gave two deep-drawn gasps as if she were choking ; but she succeeded in saving herself. She sat biting the edge of her handkerchief, the fingers that held it closed in a quivering clutch. It was really horri-

ble to see her: Sir John looked for a moment intently. His worst enemy might have pitied him, and must have conceded him a good deal of admiration. There was something of majesty in his power of self-control. His bearing betrayed neither fear nor amazement. He waited in silent dignity, not noticing her agitation, now that it seemed to threaten no physical danger to herself.

Arthur had followed into the room, and stood trembling with excitement, which he was quite incapable of concealing. Jack looked steadily at his father for a moment, as he sat with knitted brow and closed lips; then he drew his charge to a chair, into which he sank, or rather collapsed. Herbert Dasent had collected strength for a great effort. The doctors had at first scouted the idea of his leaving the hospital, but they had been

obliged to give in. It was evident that he could not rest in his present state: the burden on his mind, whatever it might be, must be discharged, or he would fret himself out of existence. He had stayed in bed for the last few days, but there was no positive objection to his going out if he felt he could manage it. Consequently they had consented to give him into the custody of Arthur and Jack, after explaining their responsibility and fully informing Mrs. Dasent. These four together had driven over from Waterdale, and Mrs. Dasent was now with Agatha in the drawing-room. Herbert Dasent had not over-estimated his strength; he sat for a moment collecting himself; Jack handed him a pocket-flask and he sipped at it: then he was ready for his task.

Sir John broke a silence which was becoming intolerable.

‘Someone, I presume, is going to give an explanation of this.’

He looked principally at his son, and there was something in his face that compelled hesitation in the younger man. Jack felt as if he were treating with a very noble captive. But Sir John persisted.

‘Let me know, please, to whom I am to look for an explanation.’

Jack made an effort.

‘I think, sir, you had better ask that lady,’ and he inclined his head towards Miss Mirabel.

Sir John slowly but unflinchingly turned to her.

‘You hear what my son says, Miss Mirabel. Will you kindly say whether this concerns you in any way? Are you acquainted with the gentleman who has been brought here?’

She gave no sign at first; then made

an attempt to speak ; but the shock from which she was suffering had paralysed her : she was powerless. Sir John waited a moment, and a cloud gathered over his face like the presage of a great storm : he saw something formidable was coming, and he was not going to accept it meekly.

Jack felt no vindictiveness at the moment ; he was sorry for his father.

‘This gentleman,’ he said, ‘is Mr. Dasent.’

Sir John raised his eyebrows and bowed formally. Then he looked at Miss Mirabel again and sat silent, evidently piecing together the links which connected these two people.

‘You are old acquaintances then,’ he said, at length.

He could not possibly doubt that the man had come to lay some information

against Miss Mirabel, nor that she had good cause to fear him.

‘I suppose I may congratulate Mrs. Dasent on the success of her search. Now may I hear how it concerns us at present?’

Miss Mirabel broke out in a wild appeal.

‘Don’t listen to him, John. He lies; every word he says is untrue.’

Sir John answered calmly—

‘He has not spoken yet. I am not aware he has anything to say against you: if he has, it will require proof before I believe it.’

Miss Mirabel writhed in her chair like a chained tiger, and said no more.

‘Mr. Dasent has come to say something very important, father. Will you hear his story?’

Sir John nodded consent, and Jack

turned to Dasent, whilst Arthur, who had by this time curled his moustache right up to his eyes, handed him a paper, and then sat down to listen.

Dasent had sat shrinking into the corner of his deep chair, apparently apathetic, but never moving his eyes from Miss Mirabel's face. Now he roused himself and took another sip from the flask. He spoke in feeble tones, but without effort.

‘Please be patient with me,’ he said.
‘I am very weak.’

‘Don't hurry,’ said Jack. ‘Take your time, and tell us your story exactly as you told it to my uncle.’

Thus encouraged, the sick man commenced—

‘My father was an army doctor named Cooper. I believe he was looked upon as

full of promise at one time : we lived comfortably at home, and it was decided I should take up his profession. When I was seventeen, my father took to speculating, and lost his money. Then he took to drink ; finally he committed forgery, and then went off with another woman, leaving my mother and myself in poverty. My mother at once divorced him and married again. She had no affection for me, and gave me to understand that I must shift for myself. She died within the year. I never heard of my father afterwards, though I pretty well satisfied myself that he and the woman were drowned in a pleasure-boat. If they weren't on board that boat, I don't know what became of them.'

Here he paused for breath ; none of his listeners stirred.

‘I was left at eighteen, therefore, without a belonging of any sort, and with only what little money I could raise on some things my father had been obliged to leave behind him. Of course the army was out of my reach now. I had no money to pay for the necessary education, and I’m afraid I wasn’t the man to surmount a difficulty by heroic struggles. I had always had a turn for the stage, and I got an engagement at once in a music-hall at Portsmouth. I won’t say much of my life at that time: it was rough, anyway. From Portsmouth I went to Birmingham, where I got as much work as I liked in the music-halls. From that I got on to comic operas, and after awhile I was persuaded to try ballad concerts: I was supposed to have a good voice. I sang for a long time at all the big towns, and one day at Manchester I met the lady opposite.’

He nodded towards Miss Mirabel, and sipped at his flask.

‘We were continually singing at places together. To make a long story short, we fell in love and got married. I was twenty-two, and she was a little younger. She had been teaching in a girls’ school till she took to singing. We were both doing well in the profession, and made up our minds to go to London. It was there we got married; but it wasn’t as easy to find work as it had been in the provinces. Things didn’t go smooth: we began to quarrel—never mind who began it; and at the end of six months we were living a cat-and-dog life. Some of you may have seen her in a passion: it isn’t a thing to forget; and during that time I saw her in a passion most days. We separated. I went on to the proper stage under the name of Dodd, though I did little good

there. My wife went back to the provinces, where she went on with her singing, and made her way easily.'

Sir John was sitting quite unmoved, but white as paper. Miss Mirabel's face suggested Lady Macbeth taken red-handed.

'Things went better with her than me, in fact. She was making a name in the provinces, whilst I had been losing mine in London. After a good while she wrote and told me she was going to the Colonies to settle; there was a fine opening there. Naturally this didn't distress me. You won't suppose there was much love lost between us: I'd repented of my bargain long before this. I saw her once and said good-bye. I was out of an engagement then, and, as I wasn't pressed for money at the moment, I thought I'd take a holiday and amuse myself. While I was about it I met Miss Grey. If I had rushed

into a fancy match with her,' nodding towards Miss Mirabel, 'I really fell in love with Miss Grey.'

He paused for a considerable time, and went on in a broken voice :

'It was a shameful thing to do, but the temptation was too great. It seemed my one chance of being happy : I made up my mind to forget I had got a wife already. She had gone to live in Australia : she wasn't likely to trouble about me : there was no one else to know or care whether I was married or not. Having made up my mind to this, I didn't scruple to lie about my position. I said I had independent means. Miss Grey and her father believed everything I told them, and we were engaged. I honestly meant, I swear I did, to work hard and make her happy. It might be a shock to find out I hadn't any money but what I was able to make :

it might be a disillusion to find I wasn't the independent gentleman I pretended to be ; but after all there was no harm in being a singer, so long as I stuck to the legitimate business. I meant to try and make her proud of me. And I would have tried if I'd had a chance : but what happened was this. My wife had put off her journey at the last moment to take another engagement at home. I was travelling as Herbert Dasent, for I didn't think my personality as Cooper was worth preserving : but by some unlucky chance a professional friend came across me. Next time he met Miss Mirabel he told her, not knowing she was my wife, that I was going to be married. She heard it too late to stop me. The wedding was over, and Miss Grey had actually gone indoors when my wife drove up. She never saw the bride, but she caught me as I was following her into the

house. I've never lost sight of her face as I saw it then: every night I dream of it, and every night it gives me the same horror. She told me where to meet her: I knew the game was up and I obeyed. From that day, gentlemen, my life has been utter hell.'

He sobbed weakly for a minute or two, and Jack had to give him more stimulant to keep him going.

'My wife had me under her thumb then. She didn't care about me before; she hated me now: not because I had behaved dishonourably, but because I had got fond of somebody else. She was going to Australia, and made me go with her. I had been so cowed by her finding me out that I hadn't even the spirit to run away: I simply did as she told me. There we lived a good time. I wasn't her husband, I was her creature. She had a hold on

me and I knew it. She made her success as a singer; I got work on the stage. I was Dodd now, on the stage and off. Meanwhile I was distracted, wondering what the poor girl was doing that I'd treated so badly. It kept me awake at night, and made me wretched all day: it wasn't wonderful I took to drink. Sometimes I thought of killing myself; sometimes I thought of getting home and going to her, if it was only to see her again. But I knew if I put foot in England my wife would have me dropped on to for bigamy. So I pretended I was dead. I got it all worked up: had a letter written and signed by a witness, informing Miss Grey I was dead. It was about the bitterest day's work I ever had to do, but I thought perhaps it was the kindest way out of it. My wife began to talk of going home after a while: she meant to take

London by storm before she had done. I wasn't to go. It was about this time I saw you, Captain Balstoun, walking with my wife, and that's what made me think of sending for you the other day. Well, she went. I don't believe anyone in the Colonies guessed we were man and wife. We had lived in the same house, but we had our separate names, and no one ever saw us together.

'When she was gone I shifted my quarters, and stuck to Wilkinson's theatre. I got along somehow, but I couldn't help myself for the drink, though I knew it was killing me. I used to hear from my wife. She let me know she was here: she said she believed she had found my deserted bride.'

Here he gave a letter to Jack, and asked him to read it; he needed rest. Jack took the note, written on Balstoun paper, in Miss

Mirabel's fine hand. It stated that a certain Mrs. Dasent was residing in the neighbourhood, and, strange as it might seem, she was apparently her own successor.

‘Remember,’ interjected Dasent, ‘she never saw her at the wedding.’

There were points of resemblance, continued the letter, which seemed to identify the two cases; but there were discrepancies. The name went for little: no doubt he had changed that; she had never troubled to inquire: but Mrs. Dasent was said to have absolute proof of her husband's death. Now Dodd was not dead. The Balstouns might know the right version of the story, but she had not been able to get the information she needed. She had not drawn the lady successfully as yet, but meant to do so in time. Meanwhile, he was to stay where he was, if he valued his liberty.

‘When I got that,’ Dasent went on, ‘I

knew my two wives had come together, and I waited to see what would happen. After a while Wilkinson told me you were inquiring for me from here, and I knew it was all up. Then I got a telegram from my wife saying you were coming after me, and I must get away. I was sorely tempted to stay and meet Miss Grey. I didn't much care what happened to me, and if I could only keep it up that I was her husband for a while, I should be ready to die, or get shut up, or get out of the world somehow. But I thought better of it: not so much from fear of the woman I had married as affection for the one I had deceived. I couldn't bring myself to do her worse harm than I'd done already, so I thought I'd best keep out of her way. At the same time I didn't want to get shut up for nothing: I hadn't courage to let her know the truth. I made up my mind I'd come

here : it was the place she'd lived in, and I felt I should like to see it. Besides, it was the last place one would expect to find me in. So I came.

‘I hadn't been here two days when I saw my wife. She was in a phaeton with the young lady, and the ponies had bolted. I recognised her at once, and my first instinct was to let her go, in the hope she'd be killed. But there was the other one—I had no grudge against her : I didn't want to see her smashed up, and I didn't care if I got knocked on the head myself. I stopped the ponies. My wife saw me and spoke to me. I was sitting by the side of the road resting. I was hurt, and I knew it. She appointed a meeting for next morning, and I could see she meant mischief. I felt an odd satisfaction in knowing I was hurt then. It might be I had hastened my own death to save her life.

I wouldn't have done that willingly, but, anyway, perhaps I had done something to cheat her of her vengeance on me, and that was a consolation.

'I was off next morning before she came. I paid a last visit to the house where Miss Grey had been living; then I went to Waterdale. I was so bad when I got there I had to go into hospital, and I didn't get out for three months. After that I stayed in Waterdale. I had an idea of getting some Press-work, but I found I could do nothing. I was drunk for weeks together. That lasted till the other day when I was taken back to the hospital. I heard from one of the nurses that Sir John was going to marry my wife, and I wrote to Captain Balstoun. I don't care now what she does to me: I'm past caring, and I can't last long. What happened since then, he can tell you.'

The man had finished his tale. He sank back in his chair; closed his eyes, and breathed quietly. He was tired out.

‘Is there any more to hear?’ asked Sir John.

Arthur responded.

‘Only this—I got his note here on Wednesday morning, and went to the hospital. I heard his story as he has told it now. I went to London partly to tell Miss Grey; partly to let Jack know that his father was being taken in by an impostor. And—and here we are,’ he ended, abruptly.

Sir John spoke again.

‘Has he any proof to show?’

Dasent roused himself, and held out the paper that Arthur had given him at the outset of his story.

‘Captain Balstoun got this for me in London.’

It was a certified copy of an entry in the register of St. Luke's Church, Southwark, recording the marriage of Herbert Cooper with Alice Mirabel.

Sir John took it, and read. Then he laid it on the table, and addressed Miss Mirabel.

'Have you anything to say? You have to clear yourself of a serious charge.'

She flung herself at his feet; she was beaten and cornered, and all the fight had gone out of her.

'Forgive me,' she cried, 'I thought he would never dare to show himself: he would be too much afraid of his own punishment to interfere with me. No one would have known. At the worst, he would have rejoined Mrs. Dasent; I didn't mind that. Now he is dying: look at him, you can see it. In a very short time I shall be free. I will be a good wife to you, John; don't send me away.'

She tried to take his hand, but he rose and stood with his back to her.

‘Mr. Tracer, kindly take her to her room, and see she does not leave the house at present.’

The old agent without compunction took her by the arm and helped her to rise. She was weeping passionately now, and was powerless to resist. She had lost all reason. Finding her mad appeal useless, she now begged him not to send her to prison.

‘Don’t send me to prison, dear Sir John. I’ll do anything you tell me to do, but don’t send me to prison.’

Mr. Tracer led her away sobbing wildly.

Arthur declared afterwards that it made him feel ill to witness such a collapse and degradation. She had entered the room nearly a queen ; she left it little better than a criminal.

When she had gone, Sir John spoke again.

‘ Make what arrangements you think fit. Send for a doctor, and do whatever he advises. I wish to see nobody this afternoon.’

Jack stood irresolute for a moment : then he held out his hand. Sir John deliberately drew away, and his son, flushing hotly, went to assist his uncle to conduct the gentleman of many names and many troubles to a neighbouring bed-room.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FAMILY PARTY AT LADY JANE DIGGLE'S.

MR. DASENT was dead. His end had been precipitate, but assuaged by unwonted consolations. It appeared as if the withholding of drink had taken away the artificial forces of life: he simply went out. His last days, however, were probably also his happiest. He was detained at Balstoun, and tended by Agatha and Constance Grey, hitherto known as Constance Dasent. The latter had scant reason for rendering unto him good; but with Death knocking at the door there was no

time to settle old grievances. The poor man had lived through a neglected and embittered youth, a disappointed and hardened manhood. He had done her a barbarous injustice, but accident had averted the culmination of evil. He had been an utterly weak creature, without discipline to hinder the free play of selfish motives; but according to his own confused lights he had made some attempt at redeeming his misdeeds. Had he appeared on the scene hale but persistent, less charity might have been forthcoming: he had come penitent and dying. His grief, when confronted with Constance, had been so pitiful as to defy obduracy. It was not noble, not heroic, not for a moment to be admired: it was abject and forlorn, and capable of exciting mere pity, which was what she gave him. To know that he was so far forgiven that Constance could read

him a story or hand him a cool bunch of grapes threw a glamour over the tragic interval. But it was brief. The band of conspirators who thus shielded the bigamist from his lawful fate stood by his death-bed, tacitly consenting to ignore their duty for once and keep their knowledge to themselves.

With his lawful wife he had had one interview at the last; constrained and painful indeed to both of them, but decently conducted. Then arose the interesting question as to Miss Mirabel's future. She had remained at Balstoun partly because it seemed hardly fitting to let her go at the moment, partly because she was too ill to move. Now what was to happen? In the interests of all parties, secrecy was desirable. If she had possessed any conscience, she must have expired under the fierceness of Sir John's wrath. He burnt

with indignation ; it put him in a fever to think that anyone should treat him with such unmitigated cheek. He saw now how fully justified Henry VIII. had been in his punishment of wives No. 2 and No. 5. Theirs was a grievous offence against majesty. Miss Mirabel's was quite as bad in its way ; possibly more unpardonably cold-blooded. He found it an oversight in the present ordaining of human affairs that Sir John was without any means of redress, such as Henry so conspicuously enjoyed. As it was, he could require on her part a speedy disappearance and unbroken silence. Through Mr. Tracer he let her know his wishes, to which she thought fit to give a sullen acquiescence, and in very poor plight she retired from the scene.

Miss Grey, at Sir John's instigation and Agatha's urgent request, returned to her

former home. The Dasent cloud had burst, and Balstoun was settling down again upon lives modified by its stormy passage. Needless to say, it was a subject not to be mentioned in the Balstoun circle. The consciousness of this and of Jack's affairs reduced their dinner-talk to the level of a *table-d'hôte*; forced and uninteresting to the last degree. Arthur did his best. He devoted a special half-hour morning and evening to collecting sensational items from the newspapers, until by unlucky oversight he found himself regaling his hearers on a breach of promise case which had read particularly well in the *Morning Post*. After this he restricted himself to city news and servants' advertisements. But it did not do: he could not get up any enthusiasm, and would have gone to London if Jack had not

begged him to stay and see things through.

In this unhappy condition the family went on indefinitely, no one knowing quite how to act. Arthur and Jack played innumerable sets of lawn-tennis, with Agatha for an audience. Sir John was wholly unsociable; but Miss Grey, after her first shyness had worn off, used to join them sometimes. Her proximity was a source of despair to Jack; he was suffering the torture of those who say 'it might have been.'

However, he had made up his mind, and he meant to go through with what he believed to be right. Constance Grey was to be his friend: nothing more. Edith, after all, was a charming creature; beautiful, accomplished, experienced: she would make a delightful wife—when she had sobered down a little, and that was

only a matter of time. He argued sturdily with himself that he had made a fortunate and judicious choice. Unluckily he fell to making his confidences to Constance Grey, and that left him aware on what a rotten basis he was building.

He had finished his tenth set of lawn-tennis, and decided he would play no more to-day. Arthur had swallowed two cups of tea, and was now stretched at full length with a pipe in his mouth; Agatha and Constance were at the table. A giant cedar-tree spread an awning above, and Jack sat swinging on one of its stout branches.

‘Why don’t we ride in the evenings?’ he said. ‘It would be great fun; don’t you think so, Miss Grey?’

‘I am afraid it wouldn’t concern me: I have nothing to ride.’

‘That doesn’t matter: we can mount you.’

‘It is a good many years now since I rode,’ said Constance, gravely.

‘Let us begin and ride every day then, and you will be an experienced horse-woman by the time hunting begins.’

Agatha could not help asking a question.

‘Are you going to stay here?’

Jack kicked the tree.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, after a moment.

The question and answer were equally intelligible, though neither meant what the bare words implied. Agatha thought that a month or two of daily riding with Constance must certainly cure Jack of his later fancy. She was the last person to regret that; but anyway it was playing with edged tools. Jack knew his danger well enough, but did not want to be told of it. He jumped down from his perch and brushed his flannel trousers.

‘Will you come to the stables?’ he said

to Miss Grey. 'You shall have your choice of two.'

She had no reason to refuse. It was impossible to avoid being alone with him from time to time. Perhaps she had been indiscreet in resuming her residence here ; having done so, she must accept the consequences. Without seeking it unnecessarily, she might reasonably endure his society, and she responded to this invitation as a matter of course.

'I never know now what to call you,' Jack began, as they walked away. 'It would have seemed natural enough to call you Connie as long as you were Mrs. Dasent. As it is, people might think it odd.'

Miss Grey laughed.

'I am sure I don't know. It doesn't matter much between old friends like you and me.'

‘I wonder what my wife will say? Now I come to think of it, she calls men by their Christian names, so I suppose it will be all right.’ In all their conversations he hastened to bring in Edith’s name—to play propriety perhaps. They talked to each other through her. ‘I must write to Edith to-day, or I shall get pitched into. She says if I don’t have it out with father, she shall come and tackle him herself: and she’s capable of doing it, I believe. She evidently supposes that, as he broke off his engagement to oblige the family, he can be coerced into doing whatever we want of him. I am not sure it was the right story to tell.’

‘You couldn’t tell her the real reason, could you?’ answered Constance.

‘All the same, I ought not to wait: I ought to settle something.’

He walked on a minute or two in silence,

comparing a long spell of attendance on Edith for the ensuing weeks, with the proposed series of evening rides at Balstoun. He stopped by a stone fountain from the top of which a centaur was spouting water into a basin. On one hand stood the stables, on the other an avenue between yew hedges. He took the latter way, and Miss Grey followed him without comment.

‘Will he give in now, or will he be more determined than ever?’ he surmised aloud. ‘Of course it will be a bore if he holds out; we have had enough family jars, but it can’t be helped. I couldn’t back out of it now, could I? I mean, there’s no reason why I shouldn’t have my own way. I must marry some one, and she is really very clever.’

‘You know best, Jack. I have never seen her. If you have made up your mind she is the woman you wish to marry,

it would be wrong to give her up without a good reason. Of course, I don't know Sir John's objections : I am sure you understand one another.'

'I don't know why we should,' said Jack, dolefully. 'I don't know that blood relationship necessarily brings people together. Agatha and I understand one another, but then we are old friends. That's all. It resolves itself into a matter of friendship, and I don't believe I could ever be absolutely intimate with my father. As for being happy—oh, yes : one talks of that ; but I am thinking of doing the right thing.' He spoke with an affectation of indifference, but there was less calculated cynicism than blank disappointment in what he said. 'It's funny I should say this to you of all people, isn't it?' he went on. 'You can't think much of my constancy.'

‘It is just as well,’ said Constance. ‘The other couldn’t be.’

‘Not then, but things have changed.’

‘You forget: I refused you.’

‘But Con——!’ he began, appealingly.

She put her hand on his arm quickly: she foresaw trouble.

‘Don’t try and make excuses: you owe me none. It is nice of you to tell me your affairs; what’s the good of having a friend if you can’t talk to her frankly? If you don’t mind about the past I am sure I don’t, so we needn’t say any more about it,’ and she laughed it off.

They walked a little way in silence. Jack was discontented. What he wanted—though he dared not admit it—was some one to encourage him in shaking himself free. No one had given him this advice except his father (who didn’t count), and he was left with his stern resolve to stand

to his guns. They had reached the end of the path, and turning into another avenue at right angles they came face to face with Sir John. They had not met out of doors for a long time, and they all felt a little nervous. The Baronet, however, was disposed to be friendly. He joined them and talked pleasantly: took Miss Grey to see a remarkable pine he had discovered, and ended by picking her some peaches with his own hand.

‘How is the house?’ he inquired. ‘All in good order?’

‘I am getting settled by degrees,’ she said.

‘What a pity you moved your things. They might just as well have stayed there.’

‘As it happens,’ she assented.

‘We will walk home with you if you will let us,’ said Sir John. ‘I can take

your complaints on the premises.' He was pleased to be facetious.

It was getting late, and, as they were half-way home, she took them on instead of going back to Agatha. The Baronet was charming. He enlivened the way with observations on botany, birds, and weather signs ; anything that occurred to his mind. He told some amusing stories, and succeeded in dispelling their previous discomfort. They stayed a short time only, and left together. She made some allusion to the riding proposal as they started.

'What was that ?' asked Sir John, as he and his son entered the Balstoun shrubberies.

'I said something about riding here in the evenings. I offered her a mount.'

'Very good idea : it will do Agatha good.'

‘But I am afraid I sha’n’t be here. I must go next week,’ said Jack, at a venture.

‘Where are you going to?’

‘Palliser.’

‘You are making a grievous mistake,’ said Sir John, after a moment.

‘So you told me before. With her, I mean;’ and he jerked his head towards the house they had left.

‘I have changed my mind: I told you that the other day. I have not been able to say much to you lately: I can’t say much now. But I beg of you to reconsider: I don’t often ask a favour.’

‘I am sorry, father. Really I can’t.’

Sir John took his son’s arm.

‘No doubt you are very much attached to the lady. I admire your resolution: but rely on my judgment for once. If you marry now, you will live to repent it.’

‘ It can’t be helped. I missed fire once : I mean to do this. My honour is pledged ; nothing will induce me to draw back. If you won’t consent, I shall be very sorry, but we must get on as best we can.’

Sir John was silent : he let go his son’s arm. It was a new departure for him to condescend to entreaty : the result was not encouraging. Next day he announced his intention of going away : he required change. As soon as Agatha went away to pay visits, he should depart too. He had Irish relations : he thought he would go and look them up. Agatha was rather glad that he should do this : she thought it would cheer him up. She was enormously improved in health since the downfall of Miss Mirabel, but there was even now more placid contentment than joyous elation about her. She still required tone and vivacity, and Sir John wanted to know

what was to become of her before he stirred. To satisfy him she sat down and wrote a budget of family news to Lady Jane, promising an early visit. It had been conveyed to her, as to the rest of the world, that Sir John had broken off his engagement under pressure from his family.

Lady Jane was impatient to hear more of this, and she jumped at Agatha's proposal. Aunt Jane would be delighted to have her. More than this; if that wretched boy, Jack, really meant marrying that horrible Palliser girl, they had better come too. It was a bad business at best, but it would not mend matters to treat them like outcasts. If Balstoun was to be empty all the autumn, they had better pay her a visit, just to show the family meant to help him in his misfortune. It was a gloomy view to take of it, but it pleased

both Jack and Agatha. She would have them under observation ; he would not be relegated to the solitudes of Palliser.

Sir John could not be induced to meet his future daughter-in-law at present. He slipped off to Ireland, whilst his children went to the Diggles, and his brother so far forgot himself as to go and do a cure at Aix les Bains. Why he went I don't know ; for his coming back again as quickly as possible I am at no loss to account.

Agatha and Jack found Aunt Jane in great spirits. She had actually secured the presence of her brother, who had hurt his knee and could not shoot grouse. She confided to each of her visitors in turn that there was a treat in store for them : Tommy had been obliged to put off all his visits on account of his knee ; but he was not a bit the worse : he was in

capital form : they'd see. What they saw was a young man of pleasing appearance who played piquet as long as he could get anyone to play with, and read either Society papers or bound up numbers of *Punch* when he could not. He talked with apparent pleasure but on the lighter topics. Upon all others he was mute ; even restless when they were broached. His sister was very fond of him.

Clarence Prigg was there : Jack had not seen him since the coming of age party at home. He had several new songs and a new servant. They were the only things he talked about, but on these subjects he was voluble. Freddy White was there too. Last spring he had been chosen by his Department for a mission to one of the European Courts (to be identified by reference to recent Blue books) where there was a nasty friction to be eased.

He had conducted it beautifully : had had leading articles in all the papers ; got his C.B. ; and found himself, on returning towards the end of the season, in great request amongst London hostesses. Lady Jane was so proud of him that she had asked him down, after declaring that he would be more intolerably conceited than ever.

Edith made only a moderate start. She sat next to Mr. Diggle at dinner on the first night. He was by no means sure what he was expected to say to her, and for safety's sake kept faithfully to politics. This unluckily was a theme she abhorred, and she made a poor pretence of being interested. After dinner she was induced to play whist, which she hated quite as much as politics. At the end of the game a grave discussion arose over deals and hands ; argument upon argument about

leads and answerings of leads which she had been contented to forget. In reaction against this tedium she went over to the piano, and, without being asked, commenced a series of the latest and most dubious songs from the music halls. Clarence Prigg, who had been singing some of his own sentimental compositions, was furious. The rest of the men were delighted, especially Tommy, who hobbled across to the piano and proceeded to beat time with a roll of music. But Lady Jane was displeased: she immediately made a move for bed. Jack looked at Edith reproachfully as he gave her a candle. He said nothing, but she answered him.

‘I can’t be bored like that. If I am expected to talk politics and play whist every night I shall expire.’

He let her go without comment, but he lay awake a long time wondering how the

visit would answer. Next day she was better. She took a fancy to the house and occupied herself in making a sketch of it. She was generally at her best when so employed, and she talked to Jack so nicely as to reassure him. After luncheon, Jack's noble relative with the injured knee insisted on some more of Edith's songs. Aunt Jane was by no means satisfied, but dear Tommy must be amused, and objection was withheld. Jack wanted her to come and finish her sketch, but she preferred staying where she was. He left them in a huff, not appreciating her musical taste, and went off for a sulky walk by himself. The result was that Tommy and Edith spent a long afternoon together, and cemented their friendship with remarkable ease and rapidity.

Agatha had intended passing an afternoon at rest with a book. She came into

the great hall, liking its large romantic proportions and comfortable corners ; but, finding it already occupied, she made off to the library. On entering she was startled—though that was not really necessary—at finding Freddy White sitting quite idle, smoking a pipe.

‘Freddy, what are you doing here alone?’

‘Wishing for you to talk to,’ he answered, with a gaiety that was not quite spontaneous. ‘We spent a jolly afternoon here last winter : let’s spend another.’

He pulled up a chair for her.

‘It’s not usual for you to sit indoors and smoke on a fine afternoon,’ she said.

‘I felt lonely, and a pipe is good company,’ he answered. ‘Has everyone else gone out?’

‘I suppose so. Edith is singing to Uncle Tommy, and making a great deal

of noise. Jack isn't there. I suppose it's all right.'

'As far as propriety goes, yes,' he assented, with a smile.

'I didn't mean that. Have you made friends with her, Freddy?' asked Agatha, sitting down.

'I tried. I am afraid I overdid it. I don't know why, but I played the friend of the family, and lectured her about Sir John, and how she ought to treat him.'

'What did she say?'

'She said if Sir John didn't like her, he might go to—Spain. That wasn't the place she meant really.'

'What a wretch! I wonder what will happen when she comes to Balstoun? I shall make it my business to try and keep the peace. Really it will be an improvement to have an object in life.'

'Not a very nice one,' said Freddy. 'I

don't see that you will be the better for it.'

'I want an object,' she exclaimed, falling back in her chair.

'That's a platitude,' exclaimed Freddy. 'It's a sham I should like to nail to the counter. What sort of object do you want?'

Agatha looked astonished.

'I mean,' she said, 'I sometimes find my life very empty. I have nothing to do but make myself comfortable.'

'That's better than making other people uncomfortable : many women only succeed in that. I am all in favour of enjoyment and pleasure : they can't be wrong in the shape you may have them. Your life should be bright and smooth ; leave drudgery to others. My theory of life is to make the best of it. Why not be happy?'

‘It seems very purposeless and self-indulgent, the way we live.’

‘People generally say that when they are not well. I don’t think it is a robust view: it is morbid. We are no worse than our ancestors. Women now are much better specimens than their grandmothers, who had no accomplishments, and swore frightfully. Be womanly: don’t envy men their work. It is the greatest danger that besets you women nowadays.’

‘And you men?’ she said. ‘Are you better specimens than your forefathers?’

‘Taken at worst,’ said Freddy, ‘we are selfish. Our grandfathers cared for nothing but port. We care for a great many things. They may be expensive tastes, and we may gratify them. That’s better than wallowing in port and ignorance. I think our æstheticism is an advance on the self-indulgence of the last century.’

‘You are demoralizing me,’ she said.

‘I’m not: look here.’ He reached down a book from a neighbouring shelf, and read: “Every day should be an epitome of a man’s life: a difficulty bravely encountered, a pleasure wisely enjoyed, an opportunity well taken, duty nobly done—or the reverse of these things.” There, my dear,’ he added, closing the book, ‘you will probably find your life quite real enough, if you consider, without requiring fresh responsibilities.’

She shook her head doubtfully.

‘It doesn’t seem to amount to much. If I satisfy myself, I do little good to anybody else.’

Freddy grew emphatic.

‘What nonsense. You don’t want to dose them, or wash them, or mend their clothes, do you? It’s not your business. It is for you to make everyone round you

happy by being bright and charming and happy yourself. You are clever, and clever people keep life from getting flat. They are the sparkle in the cup.'

'And when the cleverness consists in an ordinary smattering like mine, the wine is bad—corked, don't you call it? I should hate to be thought clever.'

'Why?' asked Freddy.

'I hate prigs,' she responded.

'What has that to do with it? A prig is an intellectual snob, generally a literary snob; a common snob in another form: you are not a snob.'

'Why a literary snob?'

'I mean a man who lives in the society of books and unduly parades his acquaintances. A common snob worships title and talks too much of the lords and dukes whom he knows. A literary snob loves culture and talks too much of the learning

he has got. I think the former weakness is the worse, because it is less satisfactory ; though, after all, it is a matter of taste and many people prefer it. You live in society without being a snob : therefore you may live in culture and not be a prig.'

' Freddy, you must really write a book. I am sure it would be charming.'

' There are several difficulties in the way ; the publishers to begin with : want of ideas in the second. Perhaps that is putting the cart before the horse. No—I expect my publications will be restricted to official documents in blue covers.

' If you do one as well as the other, the publishers wouldn't hesitate. I am glad you have done so well, Freddy. We are very proud of you.'

She spoke with genuine pleasure.

' I like to hear that,' he answered, promptly. ' Do you really mind what I do?'

‘Of course I mind—we mind very much. Father was enthusiastic.’

‘Was he really?’ he asked, keenly.

‘Indeed he was; he said your future was assured. You had quite a triumph in London. What more do you want?’

‘Only one thing,’ he said, quietly.

She was going to ask what that was. Somehow she dared not. She began instead to talk with nervous haste about his capacities.

‘You have it all before you; there is nothing you will not have if you try.’

He had taken her hand. He interrupted her with one word, ‘Agatha.’ No woman could have doubted his meaning; least of all one who was in love with him. Slowly she raised her eyes to his.

‘And I had made certain you didn’t care,’ she whispered, after an interval not to be described.

Aunt Jane was on the point of going to dress when Agatha found her. She was in her own room writing letters for the evening post. Her private tea-tray was on a table among a litter of letters and novels.

‘May I come in, Aunt Jane? I want to speak to you,’ asked Agatha.

‘What is it? Anything gone wrong?’

‘No. Something has come right,’ laughed Agatha. Then she added, ‘I am engaged to Freddy.’

Aunt Jane dropped her pen with a scream.

‘I knew it; I knew he would do some mischief sooner or later. My dear child, whatever have you been thinking of?’

‘I have been thinking of nothing else for a long time past. That was why I wanted to leave London: I thought it was not to be, and now it has happened; and I’m so happy, I don’t know what to do.’

‘ But it’s impossible and ridiculous : you mustn’t throw yourself away on a man like Freddy,’ cried the offended aunt. ‘ I’ll never give my consent.’

‘ Aunt Jane, you mustn’t talk like that,’ said Agatha, with great dignity.

‘ I may say what I like. I have taken a lot of trouble for you ; you might have married anyone you chose ; you refuse Morecombe, and get engaged to Freddy White. My dear, it’s unheard-of ingratitude.’

‘ Aunt Jane, I’m not ungrateful. I refused Lord Morecombe because I wouldn’t marry anyone I didn’t like. Don’t be unkind : I am so happy,’ said Agatha, taking her hand.

But Aunt Jane drew back unappeased.

‘ I don’t care : it’s not right : and, if John takes my advice, he will never consent to it.’

‘You will be little the better for that, my dear aunt. I shall grow up an old maid, and you will have my grey hairs on your conscience,’ urged Agatha. ‘Come, you have been so kind to me always : don’t spoil my happiness by being nasty now.’ Aunt Jane continued fuming, but she allowed Agatha to capture her hand this time. ‘You know you like Freddy,’ the niece went on. ‘He’s not got thousands a-year, and he will never be a Duke ; but he has got brains, and he is going to do great things. Besides, I want to be his wife : isn’t that enough?’

The good aunt regarded the radiant face held up to her own, and her heart melted within her. She clasped her niece in her capacious embrace. ‘Hang all the Morecombes in creation,’ she muttered, irreverently. ‘You shall marry Freddy, if you like. Dear little Agatha.’

‘And father?’ inquired Agatha, mischievously, as soon as she was set free.

‘If he doesn’t take my advice,’ said Aunt Jane, stoutly, ‘you shall get married in spite of him.’

Then they went to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER IX.

JACK GOES HOME.

ARTHUR BALSTOUN had been back from Aix about a week. He was on his way to Scotland; but he stayed in town a night or two to meet Jack, who had finished his Diggle visit and was going down to Paliser. He wished to talk to his uncle, and they had dined together overnight at the club. This morning he had gone out to some shops, and Arthur was sitting alone reviewing the situation. It was not hopeful. Jack was full of ardour and resolution, but his engagement was being con-

ducted in a very odd way. It appeared that Edith had undertaken such a desperate flirtation with Lady Jane Diggle's brother, that the hostess had become greatly alarmed for his lordship's safety. She had told Jack straight out that if he wasn't careful there would be an upset. It was her belief that Edith would throw him over without scruple for the sake of an earl: that if Tommy was caught, her wrath against the young lady, Tommy, and Jack himself would be dire and eternal. Jack had certainly been unhappy. It was not agreeable to see Edith's best humour and rarest smiles bestowed on his uncle; she had made an easy victim of him. Jack had been assiduous in his attentions, and had told himself sometimes that Edith and he were learning to understand one another. But he had been very much annoyed when she

began in the middle of breakfast to imitate Mr. Diggle reading prayers : the gentleman himself had been dreadfully confused, and his wife equally indignant. But after breakfast she had deliberately asked Jack to come and read the 'Lady of the Lake' to her. Jack rather prided himself on his reading aloud, and her appreciation had been so obvious that it had put him in good spirits for the rest of the day.

Then came Agatha's engagement. Edith had taken a dislike to Freddy—'the clerk' she called him—and had little spontaneous kindness for Agatha in the matter of congratulations. This had vexed Jack, who was brimming with satisfaction. Finally, she had astonished the company by exclaiming 'Thank God!' when the brougham was announced to take her to the station. It was not the way to conciliate her new connections ; it

did not imply gratitude for Lady Jane's hospitality. She had told Jack she was sorry, but she had never been so bored before. No one could behave properly if they were bored.

No, the visit had not been quite a success: Arthur could see that. He entertained the idea that Jack was very much in love, and proportionately jealous. He was going to Palliser now to make his first appearance in the family circle. Arthur wondered how the eccentricities of his future father-in-law and the old peer (his brother) would please him. He doubted the atmosphere proving congenial. However, the young man was going down full of confidence: he was going to make all the arrangements for a wedding, Sir John's disfavour notwithstanding.

Arthur was interrupted by his servant, who came in, shutting the door behind

him. He had an air of mystery and amusement about him.

‘Please, sir, Miss Mirabel is downstairs, and says she must see you.’

‘My eyes!’ said Arthur.

‘I told her I didn’t think you were in, sir,’ said the man, insinuatingly.

‘Why shouldn’t I see her, Clarke?’ asked Arthur, vaguely defiant.

‘I didn’t think you’d care to, sir.’

‘Why not?’ demanded Arthur, who wanted to save time.

‘I beg your pardon, sir. I thought she was, so to speak, under a cloud.’

He spoke with perfect urbanity.

‘I wish she was under the sea.’ ejaculated Arthur. ‘Here, give me a proper coat.’

He threw off a frayed smoking-jacket in which he loved to spend his mornings, and put on a black coat. He gave his mous-

tache a twist, opened another window to let out the smoke, which hung about heavily, and declared himself ready. Clarke withdrew, and immediately introduced our friend, who was charmingly dressed in black, but wore no marked traces of widowhood. She looked as handsome as ever.

‘Isn’t it funny?’ she began. ‘In all our friendship this is the first time I have been to see you.’

She stood smiling at him sweetly.

‘It’s much funnier your beginning now,’ Arthur blurted out. ‘Sit down, won’t you?’

She seated herself, and, pushing out one shiny boot, looked at it admiringly.

‘Aren’t you glad to see me?’

‘Not in the least,’ said Arthur, with his back to the mantel-piece. ‘I can’t think why you have come.’

She laughed up at him with all the charm that beauty or stage-craft had given her to use.

‘You old dear,’ she said, ‘you are jealous! You thought you had lost me: destiny intended otherwise.’ Arthur stared in silent astonishment. ‘It was heartless of me, perhaps, but you oughtn’t to have put me in the way of temptation. Your brother is not as nice as you, but he is a better match, isn’t he? How could you expect a woman to refuse such a chance? I confess I couldn’t. You must allow I had some excuse, from a practical point of view. Of course it was awkward for me,’ she went on, ‘when that wretched man turned up; but it had its advantages. I come back to my old love, after all.’

She lay back in her chair, and held out one hand invitingly to Arthur. He continued staring with all his eyes.

‘You don’t mean to say you think I’m going to marry you?’ he stammered out.

‘I certainly don’t suppose you are going to be so disloyal as to desert me. I used to say I wasn’t free: I am now. I am a widow, and all alone in the world,’ she added, mischievously.

‘You ought to be in Newgate, if you had your rights. You’d have fine company there.’

‘But I shan’t go there,’ she rejoined, sweetly, ‘because there is no one anxious to make known my misdeeds, even if I had done anything dreadful; which really I haven’t.’

Arthur was not qualified by nature to grapple with an awkward situation, especially when the situation meant a woman as full of resource and daring as Miss Mirabel, but under sufficient provocation his manliness would get the better of his

mannerism. He was so angry with this adventuress that he almost towered over her; he forgot to shrink.

‘The plain English of this is,’ he exclaimed, wagging his head with excitement, ‘that you have come to try on with me. Let me tell you it won’t do. It’s your last card I suppose, and you may be right to play it, but you had better realize at once that the game is over and you have lost.’

She began to look dark about the eyes, but she did not lose her serenity yet.

‘Really it is hardly civil to talk like that. If you want to break your word you shouldn’t try and get out under cover of bullying.’

‘I don’t want to bully,’ Arthur declared, ‘but it’s as well to speak plainly. The game is up.’

‘Well, not exactly,’ answered Miss

Mirabel, with an insinuating turn of the head. 'I have got another card still.'

Arthur looked at her curiously.

'What's that?'

'Breach of promise,' she murmured gently.

'Good Lord!' exclaimed Arthur, taken by surprise.

'You don't want your letters read in court, do you? You say a great many sentimental things in them, you know.'

'But you have been engaged to another man subsequently,' argued Arthur, blushing.

'That's just it,' she assented. 'You don't want that episode talked about either.'

'But how can a promise be valid, when the lady has got a husband. You were married at the time I wrote it to you.'

'That's true. I quite admit I might

lose the case : it is about all I could lose by going into court. You and your brother might find it painful, in so many ways. Now don't you think you had better re-consider : you know you will be very happy if you marry me.'

'Look here,' cried Arthur, savagely ; 'you suppose quite rightly that I would do a great deal for my brother, but you must bear in mind that he would do as much for me. Sooner than let me marry you, he would go into every law court in the kingdom. Have your revenge if you like : and go to law if you think it will amuse you, and you don't mind the expense.'

She smiled significantly and dropped her eyes.

'After all it can be resolved into expense. It is very wrong of you to throw me over, and I feel it dreadfully ; but one

has to be practical as well as sentimental. I might try not to care for damages if I knew of any other way of raising a little money.'

'Blackmail,' said Arthur, briskly. 'I see.'

She lifted her hand reprovingly.

'What an ugly word. Surely you could help an old friend without calling her names.'

'Look here, my old friend,' said Arthur, growing bolder every moment. 'I'll tell you what I will do for you; that's nothing. I won't say what I think of you, because it wouldn't sound nice. But understand this: you won't get one penny piece out of my brother or me. You know we don't want to wash our linen in public, but there's no reason why we shouldn't, if it is necessary. We may both have been fools, but we have neither

of us being rogues, and we have done nothing to be ashamed of. If you like to make your villainy public property, you may. I don't profess to know how far you will go or won't go, but I can't imagine you will be fool enough to give yourself away for the sake of annoying us.'

She looked at him thoughtfully now, her face as hard as it had previously been winning.

'You have altered since I first knew you. If you had left me with less excuse I would have made you repent it: as it is, I don't so much care. I am surprised all the same,' she added, musingly. 'I didn't know you had it in you.'

'I don't know what I've got in me, but I promise you, you are not going to get anything out of me,' said Arthur, facetiously.

She laughed unpleasantly.

‘Don’t be too sure. The laugh may be on your side at present, but I don’t mean to take this sort of treatment for nothing. You are an amiable idiot, and your brother is a conceited beast, and you have both insulted me. I owe you both a grudge, and I am not likely to leave it unpaid.’

Arthur’s face grew red.

‘After that perhaps you will be good enough to go,’ he spluttered out. ‘I haven’t said anything very bad yet, but we shall be getting into trouble if you stay.’

‘I don’t want to stay,’ she retorted, getting up. ‘I only came to see what sort of treatment you required. When I want anything, you will hear from me.’ She gave a vicious laugh. ‘You made a

mistake when you thought you had got rid of me ; you would have done better to make terms.'

'That's as it may be,' said Arthur, bowing. 'We needn't argue the point;' and he opened the door.

Miss Mirabel with great deliberation surveyed the room. The evidence of comfort and independence probably annoyed her; she reflected that even this small establishment had shaken itself free of her influence. The knowledge that she was held utterly vile stung her fiercely, and the sense of failure suddenly fell on her like a tormenting goad. She abruptly strode out of the room, favouring Arthur with a serpent-like hiss in her passage, and leaving him warm and bewildered, but conscious of victory. He threw himself into an arm-chair, relit his pipe, and

continued for the space of three-quarters-of-hour to twist his moustache and chuckle gleefully.

When Jack came back, he found his uncle still greatly agitated, and anxious to relate his adventures. This he did with wonderful energy, and innumerable repetitions and digressions. Jack found it both instructive and remarkable. It certainly seemed that in his family the course of love, true or otherwise, was in the habit of running wonderfully crooked.

‘Well, Arthur, it’s no use condoling with you. You may thank your stars you got let off.’

‘It’s a warning to us all,’ Arthur agreed. ‘It’s the very devil ; one never knows.’

‘Hold on,’ cried Jack. ‘I am going to Palliser to-day to make arrangements for my marriage. Remember that.’

Arthur blushed again, and began to

beat his leg with a long paper-knife.

‘Oh, that’s different,’ he said. ‘You know all about her.’

‘I expect you thought the same once.’

‘I mean, you are very fond of the lady, and she is devoted to you, so it’s all right.’

‘Of course,’ said Jack, dolefully. ‘We shouldn’t be engaged otherwise.’

‘Of course not. No : it’s all right,’ repeated Arthur, with doubtful discretion. ‘As long as you are fond of a lady it doesn’t matter how big a brute other people may think her. It’s your business : not theirs. You’ve made up your mind, and you are quite right to stick to it.’

‘It only requires a little pluck,’ he went on, ‘and it’s worth facing a good deal when you really care a lot for one another.’

‘That isn’t putting it in an over-bright light, Arthur,’ Jack remonstrated. ‘Oh,

yes,' he went on, after lighting a cigarette, 'we shall get on all right. I don't care what people say, I think she is fond of me—and of course I'm awfully fond of her.'

He sat silent, smoking. Arthur did not know what to do next, so he took up a morning paper and began to hum a tune. They sat a long time in sociable silence, fully appreciating one another's company, each absorbed in his own reflections. It is a great comfort to have animated silence in the room. A clock is a nuisance, because it ticks: a fire is good as long as it does not crackle. A live pipe is fine company, and helps you to think out a lot of troublesome things. A dog cheers one up as long as he does not bark or sniff after mice. An old friend sitting quietly behind his newspaper is best of all; a sweet narcotic to ruffled nerves. Jack knew this now.

Clarke entered with a note for him, at which he looked in astonishment: it was from Edith.

‘Is there any answer?’ he asked.

‘No, sir,’ said Clarke, and left the room.

Jack broke the seal and read. First he grew white to the lips: then he sat bolt upright a moment, dazed. Finally the blood rushed back to his face; he leapt up and danced round the room, upsetting chairs, spilling vases, damaging everything, and frightening his uncle out of his wits. After this curious display of activity, he delivered himself of three halloas louder and more shrill than any that had broken from his lips in his most excited moments out hunting.

‘It’s off, old man; it’s off, it’s off!’ he cried. ‘Read that: she’s gone and I’m free.’

He flung the letter to Arthur and

waltzed round the room, with a sofa-cushion for partner.

‘For goodness’ sake be quiet,’ cried Arthur. ‘You will have the police up if you go on like that.’

‘I don’t care: let them come. I’ll stand them all lunch: I’d do anything for anyone. Here, read that, don’t look at me.’

Arthur found written, in a remarkably ill-formed hand, the following communication :

‘DEAR JACK,

‘I am very sorry, but it can’t be done. I like you immensely, but cat and dog wouldn’t be in it with us after a year or two. If your own home is anything like your aunt’s I simply couldn’t stand it; and, as far as I can understand, it is worse. I am afraid you may be unhappy, because you are so fearfully senti-

mental : but cheer up, old boy, you may be quite sure you are out of a bad bargain. Now congratulate me, for the point of the thing is, I was married this morning, before the registrar, to John Forbes. I must stop now, as I have to write and tell my father.

‘Yours always,

‘EDITH FORBES.’

Arthur did not know what to think. Had grief and the suddenness of the shock turned his nephew’s head? He was full of alarm. He had an idea that lunatics should be humoured and soothed with gentle words.

‘You mustn’t mind,’ he began, with preternatural gravity; ‘it’s a bad job, but you must show what a plucky chap you are, and put a brave face on your disappointment.’

Jack shouted with laughter, and smacked his uncle on the shoulder.

‘You dear old boy, don’t you see I’m delighted. I’m the happiest man in the world. I got engaged like an infernal ass, because I was bitten for a time like other fellows, and I’ve been nearly mad with regret ever since. Now she has thrown me over, and I feel as if the biggest weight that ever was seen had been taken off my mind.’

‘Do you mean to say you didn’t want to marry her?’ cried Arthur.

‘Not I. Of course I did once; or fancied I did, which was the same thing: a midsummer madness.’

‘Whatever made you stick to it when you had found out your mistake?’ asked Arthur, seriously.

‘Vanity, old boy, at the bottom of it, I suppose. I don’t mind confessing now,’

Jack proclaimed at the top of his voice. 'Of course I didn't want to behave badly to her, but what I was afraid of was being thought badly of for throwing her over; especially by father and the rest of you, considering what had happened at home. Sir John would have had some ground for laughing at me then.'

'But I thought you were as keen as pepper,' said Arthur.

'That shows what a fine actor I am. I wonder if I took in everybody else,' he added, with a sudden lull. 'Aunt Jane for instance,' he added.

'What shall you do?' asked Arthur.

'When does father get home?' enquired Jack. 'To-day, is it?'

'To-night,' said Arthur. 'You can write to him at Balstoun.'

Jack went and looked out of the window. He thought the cabman passing must

be finding life very slow without such an emotion as he himself was enjoying.

‘I think I’ll go and see him,’ he replied.

Arthur liked the idea. Relations between Jack and his father had been estranged for a long time now. Here was a prospect of reconciliation.

‘Well, do, Jack,’ he said. ‘It seems a queer state of things to me, but I’ve no doubt he will be glad. She hasn’t chosen a very delicate way of breaking with you,’ he added, handing back the letter.

‘As long as it’s effectual,’ said Jack, ‘I can forgive her that.’

That afternoon he went to Balstoun, leaving his uncle a good deal perplexed. He had been shocked, in the first place, to find Jack, with his past romance, falling in love so readily with another woman. It was little consolation to learn now that

the second passion had been even weaker than the first. He feared that his nephew, with all his charm, was but fickle.

Jack meanwhile reached Balstoun, to find it untenanted: Sir John had broken the journey somewhere, and was not expected until next day. He had arrived by the late train, and went straight to bed; but he found considerable difficulty in getting to sleep: he was excited to fever point. After several hours of ineffectual tossing, he got up, and in light attire made his way into the garden. The night was chilly, but he tramped so vigorously that it mattered not. He made a lengthy round of the shrubberies, pausing longer than was either judicious or necessary in front of Constance Grey's house. There was nothing to see; all, of course, was in darkness: but it appeared to satisfy him, for he went home and slept soundly.

Next morning, under a fair blue sky, through which floated light summer clouds, he re-sought this familiar spot. The little house was awake and alive now, like all the world around it. Jack thought he had never seen so fair a morning; it was as though spring was born again in the late summer days; a renewing of its gentle influence, undiminished and undimmed.

He paused a moment at the park gate; then strode bravely up to the open door. Constance was in the passage, a watering-can in her hand.

‘Jack!’ she exclaimed, ‘when did you come back?’

His heart leapt within him to mark the pleasure in her greeting.

‘Last night,’ he replied.

She put down her can and dried her hand. Then she leaned against some coats hanging on the wall and looked at him.

Something had happened : what was it ? She forgot in her curiosity to invite him to come in.

‘ I came at short notice,’ he said. ‘ Something has happened.’

‘ So I can see,’ she said, quietly.

‘ Come in here,’ said Jack, with authority, showing the way into the drawing-room.

She obeyed him, and he shut the door.

‘ You know,’ he said, ‘ there is only one thing I have come for. Dearest, I ask you now to be my wife.’

He went towards her, but she kept him back.

‘ Where is Miss Palliser ?’ she exclaimed.

‘ She has bolted,’ cried Jack, exultantly.

‘ Read that : I really do love her now.’

Constance took her rival’s letter and read it. She folded it up slowly and handed it back.

‘ Jack, what am I to think of you ?’ she

said, gravely. 'Are you in the habit of proposing to whomsoever you like best at the moment?'

He flung aside his hat impatiently ; but he laughed.

'Say all you think, dear: and all I deserve. I got engaged to another woman directly your back was turned. There: I admit it.'

'And when she is tired of you, you condescend to put up with me again.'

'Con,' exclaimed Jack. 'Arthur told me yesterday he fancied I was very much in love. Tell me quite plainly: did you think so, or did you understand.'

She would not answer; she pretended to ignore his question.

'I refused to marry you once for reasons which you know: those reasons still hold good, and are strengthened by your own conduct.'

‘For the first,’ he said, ‘my father has twice said lately he wished I might have married you.’

Constance paid considerable heed to this remark : she only said—

‘You seem to bargain about me very freely.’

Jack suddenly flung himself beside the chair in which she sat : he rested on one knee and seized both her hands in his.

‘Con,’ he cried, ‘this is make-believe. If you have ceased to care for me, say so at once and I will go—I, in my folly, have made myself unworthy of your constancy. I lost my head : I never lost my heart, for you kept it all the time. It isn’t too late, dear, is it?’

If love is blind he may be silent too. All the sweetness of her love, all the longing of her life shone in her eyes : she bent

on him a searching look too deep for words.

‘And I ought to be so severe,’ she said at length, with comic self-reproach.

‘Do you think you can trust me?’ Jack asked. ‘You won’t be afraid of my going astray again?’ and he laughed.

‘Not if I can always rely on your coming back to me like this.’

The morning spent itself unheeded. They were too well occupied to care for time. Constance was anxious to impress on Jack that it must be clearly proved to her that Sir John favoured his son’s design, and Jack had protested that his father should come to her himself and bid her welcome into his family.

He lingered still, neither inclined nor bound to go, when through the open window they saw the park gate open, and Sir John himself emerge. Like conspirators

caught, they exchanged a quick glance and prepared for the attack. They watched him in silence until he drew near the threshold, when Constance went out to meet him.

‘Good-morning, Miss Grey. I hope this is not an unseasonable visit. I have just got home, and they tell me Jack has come. I thought I might find him here.’

‘He is indoors, Sir John. Won’t you come in?’

Sir John entered, and saw his son. His look naturally demanded what had brought him so unexpectedly.

‘I came down last night,’ observed Jack.
‘I expected to find you.’

‘How are you? All well?’

‘Very well. Miss Palliser has married a fellow called Forbes, so I can’t marry her.’ He met his father’s astonished stare with gravity for a moment, then a smile

broke all over his face. ‘And, thank God, I’m free,’ he added.

Sir John’s interest was aroused, but he waited.

‘Now,’ resumed Jack, ‘I have come back to ask Connie, who is the only woman in the world I can love as a man should love his wife, to marry me.’

‘That’s rather a strong order,’ remarked Sir John.

‘Yet there is only one thing wanting to secure her consent. Once, father, you said you disapproved of this idea: what do you say now?’

Sir John looked at Constance, and collected the plot of the little comedy being played out before him. Agatha had assured him that Jack was being swayed by caprice and impulse, not by affection; that lay in the background, where he had first implanted it. She had

been right then : and if Constance, the person who had most right to be affronted, could consent to ignore the interval, it was surely not for Sir John to dwell upon it.

He drew himself up and spoke firmly.

‘ If my views are asked, I say that I would gratefully welcome so good and dear a wife for my son. A little experience teaches us to be careful how we neglect life’s treasures. I am wiser than I was.’

It was as Sir John had said just now : Jack had come home.

The Reader, supposing anyone to have accompanied me so far, will scarcely need further information. The story ends here. Of Jack’s married life, of Agatha’s married life, of Arthur’s cheery bachelorhood, much might be told, but (in a phrase which a living writer has made notorious) that is

another story. It may be taken for granted that they all sum up in the word 'happy;' else I should never have chosen their adventures for my theme.

Sir John is believed to take great pleasure in his new surroundings. He is seldom left alone, for his son makes Balstoun his home; and, even when he is away with his wife, he leaves his children there. Or, if they too are away, very likely Agatha sends hers, or comes herself.

Jack still keeps Windlaw: mainly, he says, to humour his wife—she was so charmed with it when they went there for their honeymoon. On which occasion, by the way, Matt, who went with them, was crowded out and had to sleep under canvas. I do not know whether Jack would like to part with it really: anyhow, the shrine in the corner of the sitting-room is still standing as he originally left it, and

as he showed it to his bride. He lets no one touch it but himself and her.

Miss Mirabel, when last heard of, was repeating her Colonial triumphs. Apparently she finds them lucrative; for she has never yet carried out her threat of making importunate demands upon the Balstoun family.

THE END.





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"'The Winning of May,' by the writer who has gained some reputation as the author of 'Dr. Edith Romney,' is in some respects an original venture in the fields of romance. For the hero we have Arthur Beresford, a sort of Mr. Ruskin, an art critic whose opinion makes reputations—a man of great influence in literary circles, though, as Beresford never seems to have written or painted anything, it is not clear how this high position has been attained. Beresford is young too—only a little over thirty—which makes it all the more wonderful. The heroine, May Leslie, writes fiction of the popular and money-yielding sort. Beresford is attracted by the young and beautiful Ernestina Allingham, and a murder accompanied by some original legal procedure is required to bring hero and heroine into the proper position. May saves Beresford at some risk to her own reputation and his, but matters are not set right yet, and the reader's interest is further aroused by the fresh misunderstandings that arise. The writer has skillfully made the most of these complications, so that to the last page the personages of the story are kept in uncertainty, and the readers of the book in suspense. Beresford's conduct as a lover seems out of keeping with the character he ought to sustain, but it is thoroughly human, and there is the truth of nature also in some of those whose fates are involved in his—in Imogen, in Charles Beresford, and even in Ernestina. Mrs. Allingham is a clever reproduction of the shallow but kind-hearted woman of the world, and in Mr. Reeve we have what looks like a portrait from life of dull pomposity and inflated self-importance. 'The Winning of May' is most pleasant to read, with excellent writing, clever character-drawing, and the ingenious unfolding of a complex plot."—*Dundee Advertiser*.

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